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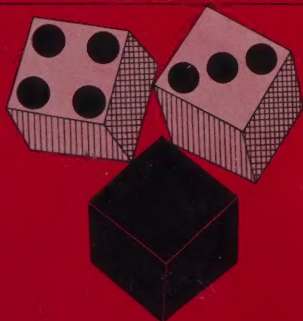
**RICHARD S. PRATHER**  
**HAROLD Q. MASUR**  
**HENRY KANE**  
**JONATHAN CRAIG**  
**FRANK KANE**  
**RICHARD DEMING**  
**STEPHEN MARLOWE**

Edited by HENRY MORRISON

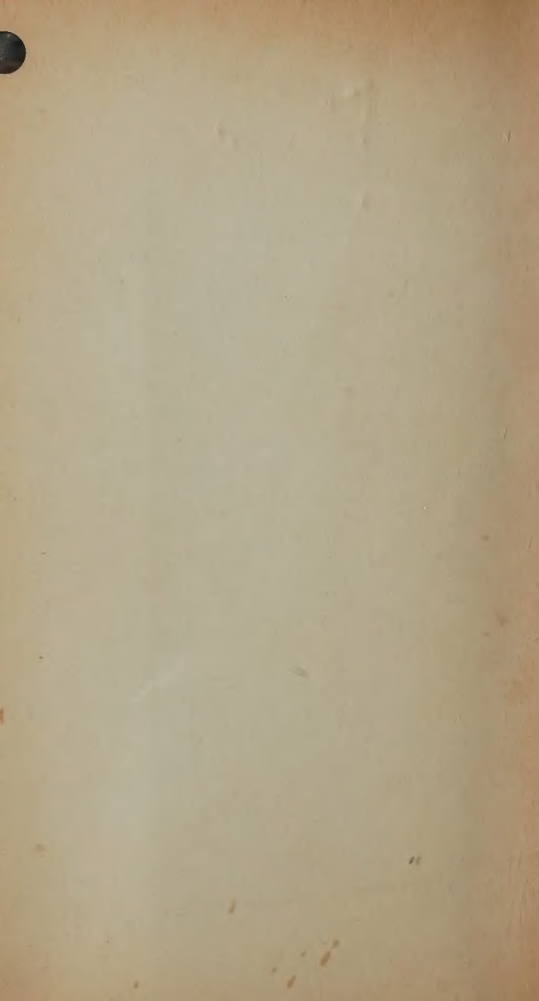
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*come seven,*  
*(come death)*

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# ***COME SEVEN / COME DEATH***

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*Edited by*  
***Henry Morrison***

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COME SEVEN / COME DEATH

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*COME SEVEN / COME DEATH*



# The Guilty Party

by

Richard S. Prather

†

THERE ARE DAYS when you feel euphoric for no particular reason; and there are babes who make you feel euphoric for particular reasons. Put them both together and anything can happen.

Maybe that's why it happened. Who cares why it happened?

She came into my office like a gal out in the woods in one of those sexy movies, smiled at me, flowed across the room with the fluidity of hot molasses, sank into the big leather chair opposite my desk, and crossed her legs slowly, gracefully, gently, as though taking care not to bruise any smooth, tender flesh.

I rose to my feet, walked clear around the desk and sat down again. "Lady," I said, "whatever it is, it's eight to five I'll do it."

She smiled, but still didn't say anything. Maybe she couldn't talk. Maybe she was an idiot. I didn't care. But if curves were convolutions, she had an I.Q. of at least 37-23-36, or somewhere in that neighborhood, and that's the high-rent district.

Moreover, if some faces can stop a clock, hers would have made Big Ben gain at least forty minutes an hour. A lot of black hair, somewhat tangled, as if a horny apache dancer had just wound his hands in it, preparatory to flinging her across the room. Narrow dark brows curving hotly—yeah, whether you think so or not, they curved hotly—over tawny-brown eyes the indefinable shade of Autumn. Lips that would burn holes in asbestos. And then that genius body. Man, whatever she had, it should be contagious.

She was looking me over, still silently. I leaned forward,

waiting. And I started hoping she wasn't really, truly an idiot.

Finally she said, "So you're Shell Scott?"

"That's me. And you? You?"

She didn't tell me, darn her hide. Instead she cocked her head to one side and said, "I almost hate to take up your time with this little difficulty of mine. I mean it's nothing big and exciting like murders or gangsters—"

"Now, don't you worry, it's big and exciting enough already, and I don't care how little—"

"I mean, I've heard stories about the big cases you've handled and all. I hardly believed them. But I do now. You certainly look capable."

"Yeah? Of . . . what?"

"Anything. You really do." She smiled. "You look as if you just got back from an African safari. After shooting lions and tigers and things."

Well, it was a new approach. So to hell with the old approaches. Maybe she was serious. Or maybe she was pulling my leg. But I'll go along with a gag. Besides, I was feeling pretty wild.

"That's me," I said. "Just got back from darkest Zuluongo, where the pygmies are nine feet tall. Braved the poison swamps, the burning heat, the creeping goo—"

"Goodness! It sounds dangerous."

"Dangerous? Why, it's not even in the UN. But nothing daunts me when I'm on a trek." I shrugged. "Killed a couple elephants this trek."

She chuckled. "With your bare hands, of course."

"Of course not. I . . . used a rock. But enough about me. You said something about a—a little difficulty?"

"Yes. It's a bit embarrassing. And I wanted to get to know you a little first."

"O.K. by me. In fact, you can get to know—"

"You see, there's a thing under my bed, Mr. Scott."

"Shell. A what?"

"A thing under my bed."

"A thing? I don't—is it alive? Hell, I'll kill it. You came to the right place—"

"No, nothing like that, Mr. Scott."

"Shell."

"It's a little funny metal thing. I thought it was a bomb at first. But it probably isn't. When I got out of bed this morning I heard it fall from the springs or somewhere—that's how I found it—and it didn't go off. It's sort of square, about three or four inches long, and has a small doodad on it. Can you guess what it is?"

"I couldn't guess. What is it?"

"I don't know. That's why I came here. I told you it wasn't anything important." She sighed. "I knew you wouldn't be interested."

"But I am! It's just that your description . . . Could you sort of narrow it down a little more? I mean, I can think of a million things it isn't. But if we're going to pin this thing down, we've—we've got to pin it down."

I stopped. This wasn't me. Or wasn't I. It wasn't either of us. This gal had me thinking with a stutter. I shook my head, remained silent, waiting.

She described the thing again, in more detail this time. Finally her description rang a bell. "Ah-ha," I said. "I think I've got it. I think your bed has been bugged."

"It's a bedbug?"

"No—look, a 'bug' is a term for a microphone or a listening device. The item in question sounds like a small radio transmitter. Though why in the world anybody would put a portable transmitter under your . . ."

I let it trickle off, as suspicion trickled in. The same trickle got to her at about the same moment. "No!" she cried.

"You're wrong, I'm afraid," I said. "I'm afraid the answer is *Yes!*"

"But why?"

"Well, possibly somebody—" I started over. It was kind of delicate. "Well, do you talk in your sleep?"

"How would I know?"

"How indeed? Well, that's out." I paused. "O.K., let's be logical. Listening devices are for listening. That sounds logical, what? Usually people plant them to hear or record

conversations—for blackmail purposes, to catch crooks, get inside information, business secrets and so on. Now, who might benefit in some way by hearing your conversations?”

“In the bedroom?”

“Well . . .” She had a point. And it stimulated my thinking. I said, “We’ve been going at this all wrong. We have assumed the bedroom bug is the only one. The place may be lousy with them. They may be all over the joint—living room, dining room, attic, everywhere. Where do you live, anyway?”

“I’ve got a suite in the Montclair.” The Montclair was a swank hotel only three or four blocks away.

We attacked the problem from all angles for a few minutes. She was a lingerie model—it figured—and thus didn’t have any big business secrets to discuss in her suite. She didn’t dictate important letters or help plan union strikes, didn’t know any criminals, and so on. She didn’t even entertain anybody in her suite, although she did mention one name, which I obviously heard incorrectly. All in all, there seemed no reason whatsoever for anybody to bug her rooms. It was a puzzler.

Finally I said, “O.K., you live in the Montclair. And your phone number?”

“Will that help?”

“It’ll help me.”

She smiled. “Oxford 4-8096, that’s the Montclair’s number. And I’m Apartment Twenty.”

“And your name?” I said, all business.

“Lydia Brindley. At least until next week.”

“It won’t be Lydia next week?”

“It won’t be Brindley. It will be Fish.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Oh, you do too. Stop joshing me. That’s the name of my fiancé.”

“Your—oh.” I got a sharp shooting pain, in an area that it is impolite to mention. An area, in fact, that it is ghastly to mention. I went on, “Say what you said again. About—about you won’t be Lydia Brindley.”



"It's nothing—really. My fiancé is Rothwell Hamilton Fish, and we'll be married next Friday."

"Nothing, huh? Maybe to *you* it's nothing. Rothwell Hamilton Fish, huh? I never heard of him."

"I mean it's nothing to do with my difficulty. And Rotty hasn't lived in Los Angeles until just lately. He's from Las Vegas. That's where we'll be married."

"Uh-huh. So he's from . . . wait. He's not—*he's not Rotty Fish?*"

"Yes. You do know him, then?"

"My God, no." I paused, closed my eyes. "That's what you said before. Rotty Fish. I thought it was a cat food or something. You remember. When we were wondering who might benefit from anything you might say, anything that could be recorded, you mentioned that there was hardly ever anybody in your suite except you and Rot—Rothwell. Right?"

"Right."

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Where does Rot—Rothwell live?"

"At the St. Charles, in Hollywood."

"Way out there? That makes it tougher. He doesn't live at the Montclair, then?"

"No, but he was visiting a friend there one day, and that's how we met. In the elevator. It was so romantic—he kissed my hand and everything."

"No!"

"He's very polite and polished, a real gentleman."

"Uh-huh. He's at the St. Charles now?"

"No, he's out of town for a few days. Wrapping up business affairs and things before we get married."

"Uh-huh. I see. Yeah. I've solved it. He did it. He bugged you."

"What? That's preposterous. And why?"

"Why not? He's bugging me—and I don't even know him. Besides, we eliminated everybody else."

"Oh, we did not."

"Maybe you didn't. Well, he won't get away with it! I'll catch him." I stood up. Then I sat down again. "Tell me," I said, "about Rothwell. All about Rothwell."

They had met two months ago in that romantic spot, the elevator. Love or something blossomed, a marriage date was set. Rotty, Lydia said, was tall and slim and dark and divine, and had a little thin black mustache. He danced like a dream, and when they'd met in the elevator, as she'd said, he had kissed her hand, like those fruity continental bounders.

"He sounds like a con man to me," I said. I was all steamed up. In this life, a man has to fight for what he wants. The government can't give you everything. Some things a man has to do for himself, no matter what you've heard. Fight fair, yes; but *fight*.

"Why, Mr. Scott," Lydia said, blinking those big brownish eyes hotly at me. "How can you say that?"

"Easy. Call me Shell, huh?"

"Shell. But how can you say such a thing? He's priceless. And he's horribly jealous, isn't that wonderful?"

"No, that's horrible. Either he trusts you or he doesn't. It's as simple as that."

"Well . . ."

"You see? He's horribly jealous. That means he doesn't trust you. Besides, he has a little thin black mustache—you said so yourself."

"But you don't even *know* him."

"Lydia, give him up. We'll all be happier—"

"Why are you talking like this? What do you care—"

"Well, I'm jealous."

"But you said—"

"Never mind what I said. Tell me more about Rotty."

There wasn't a great deal more. They had dined and danced and had wine and *crêpes suzettes*—he could even order in French.

"He sounds like a con man to me," I said.

"He's not, either. Oh, at first I thought maybe he was just after my money but now I'm sure it isn't that."

"That's clear thinking. . . . You've got money, too?"

"Yes, my father was the Brindley of Brindley Nuts—canned pecans, almonds, cashews and so on. He left me several million."

"Nuts?"

"No, dollars, silly. I'm—well, I guess you'd say loaded."

"That's what I'd say." I paused, thinking, considering all angles. Then I stood up.

"Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Montclair."

Lydia's suite was composed of living room, sitting room, kitchenette, bedroom, and bath. I cautioned Lydia to be very quiet, and we went in silently. I then spent half an hour going over the place, but all was in order except for the "thing" she'd mentioned being under the bed. It was a compact portable transmitter, all right. I left it under the bed undisturbed, then joined Lydia in the front room.

As far as I could figure it, there were only two probabilities, especially since there were no other transmitters to be found. First, the culprit was a hi-fi bug, one of those cats who sit around listening to trains hooting and crickets crickets and wild bird calls and such. Second . . . that was the one I liked.

But how to prove it? I could call all the men in town who sold electronic eavesdropping equipment, trace the man who'd recently bought such items. That could take days, though. Or, if the receiver were here in the Montclair, I could start knocking on doors—a method that also failed to strike me as speedy or efficient. And nothing would really be proved even if I found a receiver. Besides, the little transmitter had power enough to broadcast on its special frequency for several blocks.

Or I could . . . I had it.

I whispered, "When did Rot—Rothwell leave on his trip?"

"Let's see. This is Friday, so it was Tuesday. Three days ago. He'll be back Monday."

"He may be back today."

I started to tell Lydia about it but decided not to. It was eight to five she'd think I was nuts, and ten to one she wouldn't cooperate anyway. I would simply let it happen, and trust in my fairy godmother or whatever it is that watches

over me. It might even work better this way. Moreover, the other way Lydia might get confused. There was a pretty good chance she'd get confused anyhow, but in this case to think was to act.

I jumped up, walked to the front door, opened it, and slammed it shut again, being careful that it didn't lock. Then I thumped over the living room carpet.

"Well, here we are!" I said loudly. And I thumped across the living room to the bedroom and whacked the door open.

Lydia, a puzzled expression on her face, walked up behind me.

"Here we are," I said loudly, "alone at last."

"Shell," she said, "we have been alone for—"

I interrupted. "Let's have some more of those hot martinis!"

Lydia was starting to look a bit unnerved. "Hot martinis!" she said.

"That's the ticket," I shouted.

"What's this?" she said, peering at me dubiously. "Why hot?"

"Yes, why not? Let's try something *new*. Let's not be hidebound by static old conventions. I'm tired of that static. Let's be different, let's be gay. Oh, Lydia, Lydia!"

"Huh?" she said.

I trotted back and forth over the bedroom carpet, stamping my feet. "No, you don't!" I roared. "You won't get away from me now. Ha! Got you!"

Lydia stood motionless in the bedroom doorway, staring at me. A slow paralysis seemed to be creeping over her. Except for her head, which was wagging back and forth.

"Here we go!" I yelled, then sprang through the air and landed with a thump in the middle of the bed. I got my feet under me and started bouncing about. I was beginning to have a few misgivings about this; if it didn't work, Lydia and I would be all washed up. But it was too late to stop now, I had burned my bridges, cast the die, flung the gauntlet. Too late. So I kept bouncing.

"Shell!" she cried.

"Lydia!" I cried.

"What are you doing?" she yelled frantically. "What are you *doing*?"

Lydia was doing marvelously, I thought, even without coaching. I bounced up and down on the bed as if it were a thick trampoline, the springs wailing and shrieking, letting out noises actually un-bedlike. I was going higher and higher now, getting the hang of it.

"Shell!" Lydia wailed. "Have you lost your mind, are you mad?"

"Yes! This is madness—"

"What happened? This is crazy."

"—madness!"

I bounced up almost to the ceiling, and when I came down some springs let go with the twanging sound of coiled ricochets. Lydia almost screamed. "Stop it, Shell, *stop it*, STOP IT!"

"DARLING!" I yelled.

"STOP!"

"DARLING!"

"Cops—murder—*help*!" she yelled, all unstrung.

I lit on the edge of the mattress, and the bed broke, the frame splintering with a crashing sound that blended with the grating and twanging of springs giving up and letting go. I figured this had gone far enough and stopped bouncing.

Lydia had just spun about as if preparing to sprint for miles. "Wait," I called to her. "Don't leave. Listen."

She stopped, looked back over her shoulder at me. "But—"

"Shh. Listen."

There had been, I thought, the sound of a distant crash. Like a door slamming maybe. Fifty feet or so away? Then some faint thumpings. Was it. . . ? Yes, more thumpings, feet pounding, pounding nearer, getting louder. And a high, keen-ing sound out there: "Lyyyyydia! Lyyyyyydiaaaa!"

I climbed down off the tilted bed.

"What's—what happened? What's going on?" Lydia asked me.

"We'll soon know. We stirred something up. I'll explain later—"

That was all there was time for.

The thumping and keening sounds were almost upon us now. The front door crashed open. Heavy footsteps pounded across the living room, reached the bedroom. He was tall, slim, dark, mustached, and very speedy. He took one step into the room, then catapulted himself eleven feet through the air straight toward the bed, without even looking. He landed atilt and bounced and wound up in a heap over at the intersection of the walls. But he was up in an instant, head snapping about, teeth gnashing, eyes rolling.

"Hool!" he snorted. "Hahl!" He lamped Lydia, then focused on me and sprang again. At me this time. He came at me like a windmill, arms flailing.

I grabbed his arms, got my fingers around his biceps as Lydia yelled, "Rotty! Stop it!"

"Yeah, Rotty," I said. "Stop it."

But he was swinging and snorting, completely out of control. I'd managed to ward off all his blows so far, but there were so many it was getting to be quite an operation. I was sort of winded from all that bouncing, anyway.

"Look," I said. "It's all right, pal. Relax. Just a little trick."

"A *trick!*" he roared. "I'll trick you!"

"Dammit," I said. "If you don't watch out, you're going to hit me, and then there'll be hell—"

I knew it. Right then he sneaked his right hand loose and got me a good one on the eye. There was no help for it now. I stopped trying to hold him, ducked a roundhouse right, and tapped him one. It wasn't an especially hard blow but it landed on his kisser, which for at least a week was going to be of no use to him for kissing. He sailed backwards, landing on his rear pants pockets, and sat there with a pained look on his face.

Lydia ran over to him, knelt by him, and said, "Rotty, darling, are you all right? Where did you come from? Oh, I'm a nervous wreck!"

He blinked at her. "*You're* a nervous wreck!"

"What happened?" she said. "What happened?"

He said, "I'll ask the questions. What happened?"



He stared at her, his brows pulled down and down and down, until he appeared to have very hairy eyes. He looked her over carefully and he looked me over carefully. Then he said in a dull voice, "Something is cuckoo here."

"Lydia." I cleared my throat. It was time for the explanation, and I wasn't exactly sure how Lydia would take it. "This will require your undivided attention for half a minute," I said. "A sort of generous, what-the-hell attitude would help, too."

She straightened up and stood looking at me, a puzzled expression on her face. Not that her expression had changed much during these last few minutes.

"You see," I went on, "the problem was to find out who planted that item under your bed, who was the guilty party. There were several long-drawn-out ways to check the thing, but I had a feeling the villain was Rotty dear, here. I had a hunch he didn't trust you to the ends of the earth, and his 'business trip' might merely be an excuse to check into the Montclair, where he could keep a beady eye—or ear, if you'll accept the phrase beady ear—on you. So I cooked up this little episode on the fifty-fifty chance it would pop him out of hiding." I paused. "I had no idea it would shoot him out of a cannon."

"I don't . . ." She frowned. "I don't quite understand."

"You will. Just take your time. If I'd told you what I was up to, you wouldn't have believed me in the first place; and in the second place, you sure as fate wouldn't have cooperated with me in the gambit. So I just played it by—by ear. Incidentally, Lydia, you did splendidly. In fact, I hope he really has it recorded."

"Recorded?" It sank in part of the way then. She glared at me. "Why, you beast. The very ideal! You beast!"

But then it sank the rest of the way in. The first part had been merely my deviltry—or whatever Lydia might have preferred to call it. But the second part was the Rotty part.

Slowly she swung her gaze from me to him, then finished what she'd started to say. Only this time she was speaking

to Rothwell Hamilton Fish. "You *beast!*" she cried. "*The very ideal!*"

Rotty was just struggling to his feet, poor chap, when she hauled off and socked him right in the chops. Not just once, but several times, moving with much agility.

Rotty went down again, clear onto his back this trip.

Slowly, very slowly, he clambered to his feet. He knew the jig was up, but at the last there he said something that almost got him on my good side. He glanced at Lydia and shrugged, then looked at me. "Hell," he said. "I can lick her. She just hit me with eight or ten lucky punches."

Then, without another word, he turned and walked out of the bedroom and through the living room and out the front door, never, I felt sure, to be seen in these parts again.

For maybe a minute Lydia and I stood there in the bedroom, not saying a word. We gazed around the room, at the chairs, the dresser, at the broken bed, at each other. I waited.

But finally the suspense was too much. I was, after all, greatly interested in what her reaction would be. So at last I said, "Remember, I did only what you employed me to do. So, baby, you'd better not try socking me."

And at last she smiled. Gently at first. But then a little more warmly. And with this tomato, a little more warmly was like the house burning down.

"Shell," she said, "I'll bet you did kill those elephants with rocks."

I sighed and relaxed. I grinned. "Not really," I said. "In fact, elephants scare the devil out of me."

"They certainly didn't scare it *all* out." She kept smiling.

"Well, they were small elephants. Hardly more than babies. The worst part was the burning swamps and the creeping—"

"Shell," she interrupted me, "I suppose you did me a favor."

"Time will tell." I grinned. Not for any special reason. I just felt like grinning.

"But what made you think it was Rotty?"

"Oh, a lot of things—mainly you." I grinned some more.

"But just his name alone should have warned you, Lydia. Imagine going through life with a name like Rotty Fish. Bound to mix a man up. He was irrevocably doomed on the day he failed to insist that you call him Rothwell."

Lydia walked over to the dresser and peered into the mirror, patted the tangled black hair, smoothed a hotly curving eyebrow. "This must seem like an odd case for you, Shell. Different, anyway. No murder, no kidnaping—nothing even criminal."

"I wouldn't say that. Bugging bedrooms must be at least a misdemeanor. Besides, what I did to Rotty—that was criminal."

She smoothed the other brow.

I said, "Well, I suppose I'd better get back to the office. I suppose. Feed the fish or something. I have guppies, you know. Uh . . ."

She turned, leaned back against the edge of the dresser, fixed the tawny-brown eyes on me. "You've done enough work for today, haven't you?"

"Why, if you want the truth, I've done enough work for a week." I cleared my throat. "Besides, my office guppies are very well fed. Almost obese."

"Stay a while, then," she said. "We'll talk a little."

"O.K."

Her brow creased slightly. "That reminds me," she said. She walked to the bed, bent down and reached under it, then stood up holding the little transmitter. Without a word she walked to an open window, looked out and down, apparently to make sure nobody was below, then tossed the transmitter vigorously out the window. I heard it crack on cement.

Then Lydia turned around, smiling, and walked toward me.

"There," she said. "Now we can talk. Or—Shell, what would *you* like to do?"

She stopped in front of me, looking up at me, close enough to scorch, those incandescent lips slightly parted.

I grinned down at her. "Well," I said, "for a start—how about a hot martini?"

# The Corpse Maker

by

Harold Q. Masur



THE JUDGE RAPPED his gavel and nodded brusquely at the clerk who intoned, "Be seated, please. This court is now in session." He waited for the spectators to get settled and added in a firm voice, "The People of the State of New York against Bertram Heckler."

The Assistant D.A. arose. "Ready for the prosecution, Your Honor."

The judge looked at me. "And you, Mr. Jordan? Is the defense ready?"

I stood up. Outwardly, I may have looked cool and composed. Inwardly, I was burning with chagrin and irritation. I could feel my fingers itching to curl themselves around the neck of my client. "I would like to ask the court's indulgence," I said. "The accused has not yet arrived. If Your Honor would delay the proceedings until—"

He cut me off with a curt gesture. He was squat and dyspeptic, with heavy jowls and a mouth like a carp. I knew that he was still rankling at the memory of a reversal I had won over a previous decision of his. He said, "The calendar of this court is two months behind schedule, Counselor. Have you been in touch with the defendant?"

"Yes, sir. Last night. Mr. Heckler knows the trial is set for this morning. He promised to be here at nine o'clock."

"It is now ten forty-five."

"Yes, Your Honor. And I've been calling his apartment, but he doesn't answer the phone. He may be on his way down here now. If you could postpone—"

"Mr. Jordan!" The carp mouth had wrinkled in chilly disapproval. "The patience of this court is just about exhausted."

You've had two postponements already. Do you realize what your dilatory tactics are costing the taxpayers?"

Most of his adult life a political hack, feeding at the public trough for thirty years, and all of a sudden he was worried about the taxpayers.

"But the accused may have been in an accident," I said.

The District Attorney gave a snort of derision. "More likely he's skipped bail, Your Honor. Asking the court to wait on the caprice and convenience of a petty criminal is an affront to its dignity. I see no reason for further delay. And since Mr. Jordan seems unable to produce the defendant, I submit that bail should be forfeited."

The judge nodded. "The clerk will so mark it. And I am issuing a bench warrant for the arrest of Bertram Heckler. I want that man brought before me at the earliest opportunity." He rapped his gavel with a finality that brooked no argument. "Next case."

He had every right to exercise his discretion in the matter. I turned and started out. The District Attorney caught up with me in the corridor and his hand fastened on my sleeve.

"One moment, Jordan." He was smiling. "Perhaps a small conference is in order."

I looked down at his hand and when he released my sleeve I said, "No deal," and stalked out.

An unaccustomed situation, with the tables reversed. Generally, it is the other way around. Defense counsel straining to cop a plea, trying to negotiate a lesser charge for the alleged offense, especially when he knows his client is guilty. And Bert Heckler was guilty as hell. He'd been charged with receiving stolen merchandise and had been collared with the meat practically in his mouth. He was a known fence, a parasite, an ulcer. And now that the law had put the arm on him and his freedom was in jeopardy, he had suffered a nervous relapse.

I had no sympathy for Heckler. I didn't care if they shipped him over for twenty years. But I had been talked into representing him because the police had forced their way into his apartment and searched it without a warrant. True, they had

seized a cornucopia of looted merchandise from a half-dozen unsolved burglaries, but they had also violated a basic constitutional guarantee. On that ground alone, I had accepted Heckler as a client.

I felt certain I could win a directed verdict. That is why I had spurned the D.A.'s offer. And if the decision went against us, I knew it would be overturned on appeal. And I thought, too, that I had convinced Heckler to ride it out, so there was no reason for him to skip bail.

I caught a taxi uptown. He lived on Riverside Drive, in one of those old mansions that had been converted into apartments. I rode a palsied elevator to the third floor and rang the bell. No one answered. I twisted the knob and the door swung open.

"Heckler!" I called. "Are you here?"

Silence. No sound. No echo. Nothing.

I raised my voice. "Heckler!"

And then I heard it, a ragged sibilance, not quite human, like the whimpering sound of a wounded animal. I could feel the short hairs crawling at the back of my neck. I crossed to the bedroom door and looked in; and stood rooted at the threshold, shocked.

Somebody had worked on Bert Heckler. Somebody had used a sap or a baseball bat or a tire chain, wielding it over and over, with barbaric ferocity, unencumbered by mercy. He looked as if he'd been trampled by a stampede of buffalos. He was a surrealist nightmare. I swallowed my revulsion and got down on one knee beside him. He was barely alive, clinging to life by his fingernails.

"Bert!" I said sharply. "Can you hear me? It's Scott Jordan, your lawyer. Who did this to you? Who beat you?"

His eyes were glazed and unfocused. He moved his lips with a mountainous effort, but no words came. I got up and went to the telephone. I called for an ambulance and said it was an emergency, a man was dying, in urgent need of medical attention.

Until now, Bert Heckler had been a legal problem, nothing more. My emotions now were mixed, compounded of pity and



anger. Pity for a human being in distress, anger at the fiendish brutality involved. His eyes were on mine. He was working his lips, trying to speak. I bent over him quickly and repeated my question.

"Who did this, Bert? Who beat you?"

The puffed and broken mouth made sounds.

"I didn't get it, Bert. Who?"

He tried again and formed two barely distinct syllables. "Skin-ner. . . ."

"Is that the man's name? Skinner?"

He moved his chin fractionally in an almost imperceptible nod.

"Why, Bert? Can you tell me that? Why did he do it?"

He closed his eyes. The ruined face was pinched and gray, his breathing shallow. It faltered and I thought he was gone. A siren keened through the streets, growing louder. It gave him a new lease on life and his breathing resumed with a shuddering gasp. Heckler had squirreled away a tidy fortune and he wasn't leaving it without a struggle.

"Hang on, Bert," I said. "The ambulance will be here any second. Just try to answer one more question. Why did Skinner maul you?"

He strained toward me, cords standing out in his throat. Moisture formed on his temples. His mouth was working. "The rock," he whispered. "Tom Costa's rock."

The effort drained his strength. He fell back, exhausted. I heard the doorbell and I left him. A young man in a white interne's jacket stood in the hall, swinging a medical bag. The ambulance driver, carrying a rolled stretcher, was behind him.

"I'm Doctor Bowman," the interne said. "Somebody hurt in here?"

"Yes. Badly hurt, doctor. I don't know if you can save him."

"Where is he?"

"In the bedroom. This way."

He preceded me, and stopped short for an instant, staring. On ambulance duty at York General, with all the violence

rampant in a large city, with over-powered Detroit iron being catapulted into pedestrians, with his autopsy training behind him, a doctor to whom assaulted tissue was no novelty, he nevertheless seemed unnerved at the sight of Heckler. But he recovered instantly and went to the patient.

He used a stethoscope, pursed his lips, then felt the man's pulse. He measured fluid into a hypodermic needle and jabbed it firmly into Heckler's arm. He worked with a quick economy of motion, a limber specimen, with a lean functional look intensified by eyes the color of graphite. He had crisp short hair and a face that had adjusted itself to an expression of indifferent cynicism. You knew instinctively that this one would never end up as a general practitioner in some small rural community, but would ultimately minister in a paneled suite to the illusory maladies of Park Avenue matrons.

"Will he make it, Doctor?" I asked.

"Who knows? Depends on the extent of internal injuries and his general condition." He looked at me curiously. "What happened here? Looks like he got chewed up by a dinosaur. He really made somebody mad, didn't he?"

"Apparently. I found him like this."

"You understand, I have to make a report."

"Of course. His name is Bertram Heckler. That's about all I can tell you. I'm Scott Jordan."

He lifted an eyebrow. "The lawyer? I've read about you." He offered his hand. "Dr. Edward Bowman. Are you coming to the hospital?"

"Not unless it's necessary."

"Hell, no. You won't be able to speak to him anyway. He'll be under sedation at least until tomorrow." He turned to the ambulance driver. "Let's get him downstairs, Lou."

Heckler groaned when they shifted him to the stretcher. I held the door while they carried him to the elevator. When they were gone I went back to the apartment and found the telephone directory. I was curious about the name Skinner, the man responsible for Heckler's injuries. But there was a full column of Skinners in the book, and how could I pigeon-hole the right one?

I turned to the front of the book. Only one Tom Costa was listed, at an address on Barrow Street in the Village. Heckler's plight, I gathered, was due to Tom Costa's rock. What kind of rock? I wondered. Had I misunderstood his slurred speech? Were his words the ranting product of delirium? Could you credit the rationality of a man tottering near the brink of death? Had Heckler been beaten with a rock? The Rock of Gibraltar, perhaps.

A talk with Mr. Costa seemed indicated. I crossed the living room, opened the door, and walked smack into the arms of two heavyweights. They were hard-faced specimens, blue-jawed, muscular, and grimly purposeful. Each took a firm grip and pinned me between them.

"Not so fast," one of them said. "Turn around. Put your palms flat against the wall." He helped me maneuver, not gently.

The other man ran huge paws over my body in a practised gesture. It helped me identify them. This was standard operating procedure for police frisking a prisoner. They already had a handcuff on one of my wrists when I spoke.

"All right, gentlemen," I said. "You're here with a bench warrant signed by Justice Hamilton Mack, for the arrest of Bertram Heckler. This is an understandable mistake. The man you want is in a hospital, York General. They carried him off about ten minutes ago."

"Are you telling us you're not Heckler?"

"That's right. I'm his lawyer. Scott Jordan. Heckler failed to appear in court this morning. The D.A. claimed he'd jumped bail. I didn't believe that and I came here to check. I found him on the floor, beaten half to death, so I called the hospital."

"Got any identification?"

I handed over my automobile registration and a slew of credit cards. They asked me to sign a slip of paper and compared signatures.

"Sorry, Counselor," the spokesman said sheepishly. "You were coming out of Heckler's apartment and we naturally assumed—"

"Of course. You were acting with commendable zeal. No hard feelings."

"York General, you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Heckler make a statement?"

"He was incoherent, but a little medical attention may bring him around. You might question him directly."

"We will, Counselor. We will."

I followed them downstairs. A squad car waited at the curb. They climbed aboard, waved to me, and headed east. I flagged a cab and headed south.

Greenwich Village is not a village. It is an anomalous conglomeration of streets in lower Manhattan, with a uniquely distinctive flavor, inhabited by a wide variety of denizens, Bohemian and bourgeois, an area of small shops, art galleries, tourist traps, taprooms, luxury dwellings and dismal flats. Intermingled is Barrow Street, a narrow thoroughfare, not fashionable, lined with ancient walkups.

I found Costa's address. His apartment number was on a listing in the vestibule. I climbed to the third floor and knocked. No answer. I knocked again, much harder. Still no answer. I remembered a popular aphorism: *History always repeats itself*. I have always doubted its validity. I still do. But I tried the knob anyway, and by God, it turned easily, letting the door swing open.

It was a one room studio-type unit, with an alcove kitchen and an unmade sofa-bed. It had been exposed to a typhoon. Someone had torn the place apart. Furniture had been pulled away from the walls; chest drawers were out, contents strewn over the floor. Two chairs with ruptured upholstery lay on their sides. Pictures ripped apart. A violent, unholy shambles.

From the accumulation of dirty dishes, I guessed that Costa was a bachelor. But not a celibate, because my nostrils were twitching, trying to identify a fragrance that hung in the air, subtle and elusive. Not the masculine smell of shaving lotion, but a fragile, more delicate scent, unmistakably feminine, and of recent origin.

I started to pick my way among the debris and stopped

short. On the far side of the sofa, a pair of shoes were visible. Feet were in the shoes. I moved closer. Tom Costa—or somebody—lay spread-eagled on his back. His injuries were not nearly as extensive as those suffered by Heckler. He had only one bruise, high along the left side of his temple, the workmanlike blow from a sap or a blackjack.

I bent over him. His face was tissue gray, but warm. His chest moved slowly to regular breathing. He was out, in the dark void of total unconsciousness, as if a competent anesthesiologist were applying ether. I rummaged in his pockets and came up with a wallet. Papers identified him as Thomas W. Costa. He was a solid man with blunt, hard-bitten features and a balding skull.

Well, I thought, *here we go again*. There may be a fracture of the skull. Obviously, he's in need of medical attention. I was rising when I heard a rustle of sound. I whirled as a closet door opened and a figure went flashing toward the door. I took off like a rocket from its launching pad and hit the intruder in a flying tackle that landed us in a welter of flailing arms and legs.

We grappled. It was a pleasant experience, highly satisfactory on all points—although more curves than points were involved. The points were on her fingernails. The curves were all over her. She was struggling fiercely to get free, half sobbing. I locked her wrists, holding them vise-like, twisting away from the kicking heels. She was terrified, trembling with apprehension, her face chalky.

"Please, Miss," I said. "Please. Nothing's going to happen. Just take it easy."

I sat her up. Her eyes were stretched wide, rigid with restraint. "You're hurting me," she said in a small voice.

"I'm sorry. Will you be quiet if I let you go?"

"Yes."

I liberated her and stepped away. She took a long tremulous breath. Then she stood up, rubbing the circulation back into her wrists. Her eyes were on mine, watching me through the lower half of her pupils.

"Are you responsible for all this?" I asked.

"Of course not." She was emphatic. "I got here only a few moments before you did. I don't know who's responsible. When you knocked I thought maybe they had come back. I panicked and hid in the closet. Who are you anyway?"

"The name is Scott Jordan. I'm an attorney."

"Is Tom in trouble?"

"Apparently. I don't know the man. I never saw him before in my life. I came here to ask him a few questions."

"So did I."

"But you knew Costa before. You referred to him by his first name."

"I knew him slightly. I hadn't seen him in over a year." She crimped her brows, as though she had suddenly remembered something. She turned away quickly and went behind the sofa. She kneeled at Costa's side and felt his pulse, her fingers unerringly accurate in a seemingly accustomed gesture. Then she looked up at me. "I don't know how badly he's hurt. We'll have to call a doctor." She straightened and reached for the phone. She dialed, apparently on familiar ground, and spoke with authority.

"You're a nurse," I said when she hung up.

"Yes. How do you know?"

"From the way you handled yourself."

She regarded me solemnly for a moment, a medium-sized girl in a tailored suit, with dark slanting eyes and a warm mouth, with fine bones in her face and milk-blue shadows at her throat, with an assertive bosom and coltish legs. She had a look of independence and adventure that did not quite match her air of subdued gravity.

I embraced the room with a broad gesture. "Are you prepared to answer a lot of questions about the mess here, about Costa's injury?"

"How can I? I don't know anything about any of it."

"That may be. But finding you here is going to make the police very curious. Can you do anything more for Costa?"

"Not here."

"Then you don't have to stay. You've done your duty. Help is on the way. I think it would be wise to leave right now."



She seemed dubious, but I moved close and took her arm and nudged her out and down to the street. "I can use a drink," I said, "and perhaps some nourishment. I'd like you to join me."

She nodded, with no trace of coyness. "I'd be happy to."

We found a bar, a quiet oasis, dimly lit, unencumbered by a juke box. The place was cool and empty and we sat in a booth at the rear. We had martinis and a speciality of the house, Irish stew, that was surprisingly good. By the time coffee arrived she was almost fully relaxed.

I learned that her name was Anne Lindquist, that she had been among the first to enlist in the Peace Corps, that she had served as a nursing supervisor in an outpost dispensary in Nigeria. She had been released to come home because of a family problem. Her father, Frank Lindquist, had been a minor consular official stationed in Bern, Switzerland. After suffering a mild coronary he had resigned his post and had sailed aboard a Cunard liner that had docked in New York four days ago. Anne had flown in by jet, landing at Idlewild yesterday morning.

"Was it a pleasant reunion?" I asked.

Her eyes filled suddenly. She touched them with a handkerchief, blinking back the tears. She said in a small voice, "I didn't see him, not alive. He—he was dead when I got here."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Would it help to tell me about it?"

She closed her eyes tightly for a second. "Dad's ship arrived on Monday. He was one of the first to clear through customs; it's just a formality for men in government service. He had left the pier and was looking for a taxi when it happened—another heart attack." Her voice faltered and she shook her head. "In the street. He fell in the street, with no friends around him. Just a policeman, a stranger. They called an ambulance, but it was no use. Dad's heart just gave out. He died on the way to the hospital." She controlled her lower lip between her teeth for an instant. "They held the body until I got here. The funeral was yesterday."

I anticipated her needs and ordered a pair of brandies.

She managed a brave little smile. "You're not trying to get me drunk, are you?"

"Alcohol sometimes helps. Would you care to tell me about Costa?"

"There's very little to tell. You see, Costa was present when Dad died, and I just felt I had to speak to him. I wanted to know if Dad said anything, if—" She shrugged. "It was an impulse, perhaps a foolish one. I got Costa's address from the hospital."

"What hospital?"

"Where he worked. York General. Tom Costa's an ambulance driver. He was—" She stopped as I sat erect and looked at me anxiously. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Just a coincidence. Please go on."

"Well, Costa was driving the ambulance that took Dad to the hospital. I knew him slightly because I used to work at York General before I joined the Peace Corps. I wanted to see the interne first, of course, but he was on emergency call and not available. Costa had the day off. So I went to his apartment and you know what I found there."

"Tell me," I said. "The interne. Would his name be Bowman—Dr. Edward Bowman?"

She stared at me curiously, frowning. "For Pete's sake! How do you know that?"

"Another coincidence, Anne. I saw Bowman a short while ago."

"But he's supposed to be on duty."

"He was on duty when I saw him. A client of mine had been injured and I called for help. Bowman was riding the ambulance that responded. Does the name Heckler—Bert Heckler—mean anything to you?"

She thought and shook her head. "I never heard it before. Who is he?"

"A professional fence."

"Fence?"

"A receiver of stolen property."

"Oh! Are you a criminal lawyer?"

I smiled. "I'm a lawyer who defends criminals. That's not

quite the same thing as a criminal lawyer. Do you know anything about Costa's personal life?"

"I don't think he's ever been married. But he's a relentless chaser. He fancies himself as a lady's man, absolutely irresistible. I remember him trying to date the nurses, the probationers, the clerical help, anything in skirts. He caught me in a weak moment once and I let him buy me coffee. He kept boasting, he told me if I went out with him we'd see all the shows, go to the most expensive nightclubs, whatever my heart desired, and as for his prowess in the boudoir, well, he could submit references from some of the most prominent debutantes of the past few seasons. It was an unpleasant experience and I wearied of him quickly."

"Do this for me, Anne. Try to think of him in relation to a word. The word is 'rock.' Does it ring a bell of any kind?"

"Rock?" She was puzzled, saw that I was serious, squinched her eyes ruminatively for a moment, and then shook her head. "It means nothing to me. Why?"

"Bert Heckler had been beaten because of something he called Costa's rock. I'm trying to find a connection. It seems—"

The words dribbled away as an explanation suddenly occurred. It digested in my brain and now the connection seemed clear. Heckler was a fence. He dealt largely in stolen jewels. And in underworld vernacular there are synonyms for rock: ice, glass, *diamonds* . . . Tom Costa, somewhere, somehow, had come into possession of this commodity, and had disposed of it to Heckler.

The rock was hot. Heckler should have buried it. He should have waited for it to cool off. Instead, he had tried to unload the item. And had, as a result, been battered half to death, tortured until he cracked, divulging the source of supply, Costa, to his assailant. Which, in turn, accounted for the shambles in Costa's apartment. Apparently, a man named Skinner, or his agents, had taken the place apart.

These deductions had sufficient protein for further investigation. Other angles occurred to me. I suspected that Anne would not find them palatable. The truth seldom is.

"The policeman on duty at the pier," I said, "when your father was stricken. Do you know his name?"

"No. Is it important?"

"Maybe. Excuse me for a moment. I want to make a telephone call."

I patronized a phone booth at the rear. With my connections at Headquarters I learned the name of the cop in question. I went back to Anne and asked where I could reach her. She was staying with a friend in the Fifties.

"I have some work to do," I said. "But I'd like to see you later. Will you have dinner with me?"

She shook her head. "I don't really feel like going out. You know, finding out about Dad and everything." She brightened perceptibly. "But my roommate is on duty tonight. I'll prepare something at home if you'll come to the apartment."

I accepted. "It's the best offer I've had all day."

Outside, I put her in a cab, got one for myself, and told the driver to take me to Pier 90 on the North River. The Queen Elizabeth was in port, taking on provisions and cargo. Winches groaned and the huge booms towered against a cloudless sky. Seagulls wheeled overhead, wind-borne mendicants croaking for alms.

The elevated structure of the West Side Drive threw its shadow over Patrolman Leo Jablonsky, a burly cop with a good-natured face and a weathered look. He answered my questions readily, cooperative and garrulous.

"Frank Lindquist?" he said. "Sure, I remember. The old boy with the heart attack. I was standing right there, ten feet away when it flattened him. Dropped like a sack. I ran over and I could see right away he was in trouble. He couldn't breathe and his face was like wet paper. I stuck my coat under his head and ran for a phone. Got Emergency and told them to step on it or they'd have a D.O.A. on their hands. York General had an ambulance here in twenty minutes. That's when I had the trouble. Almost had to club this guy who was trying to stuff Lindquist into a cab."

"What guy?"

"Some clown said he was a friend of Lindquist's and wanted

to take him to a private hospital. I told him nothing doing. He was all excited and sweating. We argued and he got tough. So I waved my nightstick over his head and that simmered him down."

"Can you remember anything else about him?"

"Sure. He wore a chesterfield and a derby and a small brush mustache. He was a fast-talking article, well-fed, and prosperous looking."

"Did he identify himself?"

"I asked, but he refused. That's why I wouldn't let him take the luggage."

"What luggage?"

"Lindquist's. He said he'd take care of it, he even tried to wrestle it away from me. I had to show him the nightstick again."

"Where is the luggage now?"

"I turned it over to the property clerk. The family of the deceased probably has it by now."

"After that, what happened?"

"Nothing. This joker just got into a cab and took off." Patrolman Jablonsky rubbed his chin. "You want to know where he went?"

"Very much. Can you tell me?"

"I can't, but Manny can."

"Manny who?"

"Manny Glass. Drives a Yellow Cab. Tell you what, call the dispatcher. They keep a record of every trip. Glass picked up his passenger and left here about two-fifteen."

"You've been a great help, officer. And a credit to the force."

"Yeah. Tell the Commissioner."

I found a phone booth and got through to the dispatcher at Yellow Cabs. Glass, he told me, after checking the records, had driven a passenger from Pier 90, North River, to the Adams Building on Forty-seventh Street.

The building was just east of Fifth Avenue in the heart of the jewelry exchange. There was a listing in the lobby for a Daniel M. Skinner on the ninth floor. The name appeared

again on the door upstairs, and below it the legend: *Diamond Importer*. He was in a business that seldom knows a depression. It is supported by that durable commodity, love, and the requirements of industry, with prices maintained by the most competent monopoly in the world of free enterprise.

Inside, heavy grillwork prevented visitors from entering beyond the reception desk. A girl with blood-red lips and silver fingernails and twenty karat zircon earrings informed me that Mr. Skinner was out and she didn't know when he'd be back.

At least I knew where he could be reached, if Bert Heckler failed to survive. And knowing his business seemed to apply intense heat to the various fragments, fusing them into a logical pattern.

My destination was the address Anne had given me. She opened the door and then opened her eyes even wider. "Good Lord! You must be hungry. You're six hours early."

"Something came up, Anne. I need your help."

"Of course."

"Did you get your father's luggage from the police?"

"Yes." She was frowning. "But I don't understand . . ."

"Have you checked the contents?"

"Not yet."

"Would you do that now?"

She made an uncertain gesture. "I'm not sure I'm up to it, Scott. Seeing all his intimate possessions and—"

"Would you let me do it? I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

Sudden concern clouded her face. "Was Dad involved in something?"

"The possibility exists. You'll have to trust me."

After a long moment she nodded and led the way into the bedroom. She pointed. A large suitcase and a valpak were stacked in a corner. She huddled in the doorway, hands clasped around her own elbows, hugging herself as if she were cold.

I examined the contents of both bags carefully. I checked

the linings and inspected the seams, to no avail. I repacked and put them back in the corner.

"What did you expect to find?" Anne asked.

"Nothing. I just had to make sure. Do you still know some of the people at York General?"

"I suppose so."

"Will you come there with me? I need some information about your father's death."

"He had a heart attack; there's no mystery about that."

"Was an autopsy performed?"

"It generally is when a man dies suddenly, without a personal physician to certify the cause."

"Let's find out about it."

York General was a complex of old and new buildings. Anne was familiar with the network of corridors. The head nurse, a matronly woman, greeted her warmly. She knew of Frank Lindquist's death and tendered a simple condolence. In response to a query about the autopsy she referred us to a Dr. Cohlan in Pathology.

"I heard you were trying to see Dr. Bowman," she said to Anne. "He's going off duty now. You can probably find him if you hurry."

We caught the interne just outside the Receiving Room. "Hey, Counselor!" he said, not looking at me, sizing Anne up with an appreciative gleam. "That client of yours, Heckler, is going to make it after all. He's responding fine. But I don't think you can see him. He's under heavy sedation and there's a cop outside his door."

"I'm here on another matter," I said. "This is Miss Anne Lindquist."

"Lindquist?" His smile became grave. "Any relation to . . ."

"Frank Lindquist was my father," she said. "I understand you were on the ambulance that brought him here."

"Yes."

"Was he in pain?"

Bowman shifted uncomfortably. "There is always some



pain. I slipped a nitroglycerin pill under his tongue and it gave him immediate relief."

"Was he conscious?"

"Most of the time."

"Did he say anything?"

"Not a word, Miss Lindquist."

"Are you living at the hospital, Doctor?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "There's a shortage of space here. I have a room at the Claymore, two blocks away."

"Will you be there later? I'd like to see you."

"Anything special, Counselor?"

"We'll discuss it later. Right now we have an appointment with Dr. Cohlan."

He was tampering with his ear, watching us curiously when we left. Dr. Cohlan remembered Anne and greeted her with pleasure. He was a lean man with a professorial look, who gave an impression of low-pressure amiability. He was able to spare a few minutes from his schedule.

"Too bad about your father, Anne," he said. "The damage to his heart was severe, but not so extensive it had to be fatal. There was considerable narrowing of a coronary branch, where a thrombus had formed. Anti-clotting drugs like heparin were indicated and, of course, digitalis to give the organ added pumping power. If they'd got him here sooner, he might have been saved. Of course, the oxygen should have helped, but . . ." He shrugged. "Those things happen. Sometimes it's a matter of luck."

Anne managed a crumpled smile. "Everyone did his best, I'm sure." She looked tired.

I said, "One of your ambulance drivers was hurt, Doctor. Was he brought here to York General, do you know?"

"Tom Costa, yes. I heard about it." He shook his head. "Too much violence in this city. The police think he may have surprised a prowler. But they're wrong. We're pretty good detectives here ourselves. One of our men found the mark of a hypodermic needle. He wondered if Costa was an addict, if he'd been filching narcotics. They pumped out his stomach

and found traces of LSD. Luckily his blood stream hadn't absorbed the whole shot."

"LSD? What's that?"

"Lysergic acid and diethylamide. A drug used by psychiatrists. It's called instant analysis. Cleans out the subconscious like lye in a septic tank. Makes people talk. If Costa had—"

He was staring at me, jaw hanging. Without permission I had lunged at his telephone. I dialed a familiar number, identified myself, and asked for Detective-lieutenant John Nola of Homicide. I broke into his greeting brusquely. "This is urgent, John. You want to prevent a homicide and nail a murderer, get over to the Hotel Claymore on the double. Dr. Edward Bowman's room. A couple of boys who play rough are probably there. Bring help." On the way out, I spoke over my shoulder. "See you tonight, Anne. I hope."

Her voice faded in my ears as I steamed down the corridor. No taxi was in sight, so I covered the two blocks on foot in a swift gallop. Internes are not generously paid. The Claymore was a seedy hostelry still on its way downhill. I got Bowman's room number from an apathetic clerk and took the stairs three at a time to the second floor.

I stood outside and heard voices, low but intense. I could not hear well enough to understand. I had intended waiting for Lieutenant Nola, but the sound changed my mind. It had the vicious crack of a clubhead teeing off against a golf ball. A body fell. I could imagine the impact of knuckles against Bowman's jaw.

I backed off, allowing myself enough room to gather sufficient momentum. My shoulder hit the door with pile driver force. It shuddered precariously, but held. It opened by itself as I lunged and the momentum carried me clear through, colliding with a chest of drawers. The door banged shut behind me.

"Stand fast," a voice said. "One move and you're dead."

I held my breath.

"All right. Now turn around."

I faced them slowly. The well-groomed man with the brush mustache was obviously Daniel M. Skinner. His colleague

was a tough, limber item with a harsh predatory face and deadly cold eyes. The Smith & Wesson caliber .38 seemed an extension of his hand. Dr. Edward Bowman was sitting on the floor, a glazed look in his eyes, the welt on his jaw turning visibly purple.

"Your name?" Skinner's voice was brittle.

I smiled. All I had to do was stall until Lieutenant Nola arrived. For the time being, my intrusion had saved Bowman. But Skinner prodded him roughly with his foot.

"Identify this monkey, Doctor."

"The name," I said, "is Jordan. Scott Jordan."

He lifted one eyebrow. "The attorney?"

"That's right."

"Why the precipitous entrance?"

"I didn't think you'd let me in."

"You could have knocked. Is Bowman a friend of yours?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you want with him?"

"I don't want anything with him. The police want him."

Now both eyebrows were up. "The police? What for?"

"You'll find out in a moment. They're here now."

I had heard footsteps. In that instant the doorjamb splintered and the door exploded inward. City employees spilled into the room. Lieutenant Nola had taken me at my word and brought along four of his finest, hand artillery out and ready for action. He sized up the scene with a quick sweep of his eyes. He walked over to the gunman, who stood motionless, in slack-jawed surprise, and removed the Smith & Wesson from his hand.

"Who is this bird?" Nola asked me.

"I don't know, Lieutenant, but you can certainly book him for violation of the Sullivan Law."

"I'm afraid not," Skinner said imperturbably. Outmanned, outgunned, and outmaneuvered, he had quickly recovered his poise. "This man has a license to carry a gun. I arranged it. I'm a diamond importer and he works for me. Daniel M. Skinner is the name."

"Okay," I said. "Then you can book him on a charge of felonious assault."

Ed Bowman scrambled eagerly to his feet. "That's right. They threatened to kill me."

"Careful," Skinner warned. "Think twice, Doctor. Are you sure you want to press charges?"

"He doesn't have to," I said. "There's Bert Heckler and Tom Costa. Your assault on those two gentlemen was violent enough to put them both in the hospital, close to death."

"I know about Heckler," Nola said. "Homicide was getting ready to move, in case he died. Who is Costa?"

"An ambulance driver," I said. "Let me elaborate, Lieutenant. Mr. Skinner here was telling the truth. He is a diamond importer. Sometimes legitimate, sometimes not. On occasion he prefers to cut Uncle Sam out of the picture. No duty, higher profits. Four days ago he brought a shipment into the States. He had met a government employee returning home on the same ship. Frank Lindquist was ill and retiring on a pension. He probably hadn't saved much and needed money. So he was ripe for a snow job and Skinner conned him into smuggling the stuff past customs. State Department officials are subjected only to cursory checks. Lindquist figured, what the hell, the diamonds would get in one way or another, what difference did it make? At least he'd be able to leave something to his daughter."

Skinner had drawn himself up in full pompous dignity. "These are scurrilous imputations. You're opening yourself to a charge of slander."

"Maybe. But when Lindquist suffered a heart attack in the street, something you never anticipated, and they called an ambulance, you almost had a heart attack yourself. You were in a terrible sweat. You didn't know whether the diamonds were concealed on his person or in his luggage. You tried to load the stricken man into a cab, and when you failed you tried to grab his luggage. You got into a hassle with the cop. And you refused to tell him your name because you knew if they found the diamonds they might be linked to you. Patrolman Jablonsky can put the finger on you."

Skinner's jaw was clamped tight. Moisture had begun to form along his temples. "That proves nothing. Lindquist was a friend of mine. I was trying to help him. If any diamonds were found, they had nothing to do with me."

"Oh, the diamonds were found all right. Not by the police, though. They were found by Dr. Bowman here, when he loosened Lindquist's collar and unbuttoned his shirt. Taped under the man's armpit perhaps. I don't know. But Bowman, living on peanuts as an interne, suddenly saw riches within his grasp. A golden opportunity. A stake for the future. And he grabbed it. But he had to make sure that Lindquist would never confront him. So he discarded his Hippocratic oath. He neglected to administer the proper drugs and he removed the oxygen mask. He sat there and let a sick man die—"

"No!" It wrung a cry of anguish from Bowman's throat. His blurred gaze groped around the room.

"Yes," I said. "You deliberately killed a man. And Costa saw you through the rear-vision mirror. But he said nothing at the time. And later he made a search of the ambulance and found a single stone that had fallen to the floor. I imagine he intended to blackmail you. In the meantime, though, he needed money; he had expensive tastes in women. So he took the stone to Heckler and sold it. Heckler should have kept it under wraps. But he tried to find an outlet and Skinner saw the diamond and recognized it as part of his lost shipment."

"That's a lie!" Skinner's voice was up a full octave.

"Is it? Then why did you beat Heckler almost to death? You forced him to divulge where he got the stones and that led you to Costa. You searched Costa's apartment and shot him with drugs to extract the truth. A fortune was at stake and you meant business. Costa melted under heat and told you about Bowman. That's why you're here, with this armed torpedo."

A pulse was kicking erratically in Skinner's temple. "This is all guesswork."

"Sure," I said. "But easily validated. We'll find the stones, even if Bowman doesn't cooperate. They can be traced back to their source in Europe, and the sale to you identified."

They're here now, never having been declared. So you're guilty of smuggling. You'll pull a term in the federal penitentiary and then you'll be back in business. But not Bowman. He'll never be in business again. He probably won't even be alive."

Bowman cried out, his face lost and bankrupt. He bent stiffly forward and put his face in his hands.

"They're all yours, Lieutenant," I said. "You can wrap it up without me. And now, if I can be excused, I have a date."

Anne Lindquist was entitled to a minimum explanation and the maximum TLC. Tender loving care.

# The Memory Guy

by

Henry Kane

†

IT WAS EARLY morning, but I had a worried client. I pushed her button and waited until the peephole moved. I saw the bright blue eye, and the peephole closed. Then she opened the door and she said, "You're a doll to come so early."

"Nine-thirty," I said. "That was our appointment."

"You're usually asleep at nine-thirty."

"I don't usually have a client as frightened as you."

"Frightened to death. You can't imagine what a week it's been."

"I can, Rosie, but I tell you again—people who make threats over the phone rarely do much else." I walked through the living room to the phone on the desk and lifted the receiver. The phone was dead. "Good girl," I said.

"I did what you told me."

"When was it disconnected?"

"Yesterday. There's a man coming to switch it to a new number."

"Good girl."

"Hungry?"

"Starved."

"You'll have breakfast with me?"

"You bet."

I followed her to the kitchen and watched her as she puttered at the stove. She was nervous as a filly and jumpy as a hare but she was a gorgeous creature: Rosanne Hamilton, rising young actress, driven, obsessed, fighting the world—even her father—in pursuit of her career.

I thought about the father while the daughter performed at the skillets. Judge David Hamilton, recently retired from General Sessions. The old man, a widower and a millionaire



many times over, had gone along with what he had considered temporary whims on the part of his only child. Upon her being graduated from college, he had consented to her having her own apartment although he had insisted that he have a key. He was a conservative man, straitlaced as an old-fashioned corset. Her interest in dramatics had, to put it mildly, distressed him, but the old Judge had applied psychology: he had voiced objection but he had made no overt move; not at the beginning; he had hoped it was a disease that would run its course and end.

"Bacon with your eggs?" Rosanne called.

"Yes ma'am."

"How do you like your bacon?"

"Crisp."

"The eggs?"

"Over lightly."

She returned to her skillets and I returned to my contemplation of Papa. The disease had not ended, it had progressed; and then the Judge had made many overt moves, none subtle. The old man was past seventy, a craggy New Englander, a Victorian throwback, a relic. There are not many any more; in today's aura they are anomalies; but they exist; and in their own way they suffer. The Judge suffered, and would not suffer his daughter to be an actress. To him an actress was akin to a tart, a strumpet—not for his daughter!—and the old Judge had taken steps. He had ceased paying the rent for her apartment. He had cut off her substantial allowance. He had implored, then commanded, then threatened. He had even engineered—evoked—her marriage to a young lawyer, George Hudson. Nothing had helped: The daughter was as adamant as the father. The contest had progressed to conflict, and then to schism.

Now she brought eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee to a pine-paneled breakfast nook and we ate.

"It's been hell, a week of hell," she said.

"I'm sure."

"The calls at all hours. The obscenities. The threats."

"But not to you,"

"Pardon?"

"The threats weren't directed to you, Rosie. 'Tell the Judge I'll murder him; tell the Judge I'll knife him.'"

"And then the stream of filth." She shuddered.

"But when you told the Judge—"

"He just shook it off. Maybe he's accustomed to cranks. I'm not."

I stirred sugar into my coffee.

"How're you two getting along?"

"We're not." Her eyes filled with tears. "He's impossible. He's over the hump. He's senile, I tell you. We had a terrible scene yesterday in Mr. Swanson's office. Probably the last—"

The bell rang.

She jumped, gasped.

"Easy," I said. "I'll get it."

I went to the door and opened it for a smiling young man carrying equipment.

"Telephone Company," he said.

I led him into the living room. "Right there on the desk."

"Thank you, sir."

He went to work and I went back to the breakfast nook.

"Phone man," I said.

"Yes, I heard."

"By the way, anyone else—aside from your father—have a key to this place?"

"No."

"The Memory Guy?"

She squinted. "Who?"

"George. Your husband, you know? George Hudson."

"No. George doesn't have a key. He returned his key . . . when . . . when we decided to live apart." She pushed away her coffee cup. "Now, Peter, please. I've been patient, I haven't badgered you, but you've been working, and you *must* have something to tell me—*something!*"

"I've got a hunch we're going to resolve it today."

"Oh, I hope to God!"

She stood up and took away the dishes. Obviously her nerves had bitten through: she needed something to do. Des-

pite the strain—and the strain showed—she was very beautiful: thick red hair, enormous blue eyes, tall defiant carriage. She was Rosanne Hamilton, actress, and she wore it like an emblem. She was Rosanne Hamilton, now in rehearsal for an important role, female lead in a Broadway play, and that strain showed, and other strains: the strain of the marriage that had broken up, the strain of the long struggle with her father, and now the strain of the harassment by the anonymous caller.

She brought coffee in fresh cups and sat opposite me.

"Well, Peter?"

"I've done a check on all the recently released prisoners who were sentenced by your father." I lit a cigarette, inhaled, sipped coffee on top of it. "Every now and then a psycho stores up animus against the sentencing judge. Now there was only one such prisoner-release within the last month and it's my hunch—"

"Pardon me." It was the telephone man, smiling in the doorway. "I have changed up the old instrument and put in a new one unlisted and if you have any further annoyance, ma'am, please let us know and we'll do it all over again."

"Thank you," Rosanne said.

"Would you sign here, Miss Hamilton?"

She signed and I let the guy out and locked the door and came back to the breakfast nook. "Where was I?" I said.

"The released prisoner."

"Sentenced a year ago, just before your father retired. Jeff Anderson, lives with his parents at 2 West 18th. A kid of twenty-two, sneak thief, petty burglar. I've talked with his Parole Officer. He fits. A kook-type, a coward, a grudge bearer. A sick-type kid who can let loose like that over a phone. We've an appointment with him at noon."

"We?"

"You may be able to identify the voice. The Parole Officer will be there too. If he's our boy, we'll put a stop to this once and for all."

"But I promised to be at the lawyer's office at eleven. And at one o'clock I've got rehearsal."

"So? Noon fits right in between."

"Will you go to the lawyer with me, please, Peter?"

"Sure."

"I . . . I'm afraid to go about alone these days."

"Sure," I said.

Adam Swanson had his office in the Empire State Building and there the receptionist talked to her mouthpiece and then said to us, "Mr. Swanson is busy but Mr. Hudson will be right out," and then George Hudson pushed through the leather swinging doors.

He was tall, dark, handsome, ruddy, with a wide white smile: the Memory Guy. He was quite famous for that quirk of his: what the eye saw the brain registered—a photographic memory. He was also a brilliant young lawyer. It was that combination—the photographic memory and the brilliant mind—that had won him the job as legal secretary to Judge Hamilton. When the Judge had retired he had recommended his protégé to his closest friend and former law partner, Adam Swanson.

We did "Hi" all around and then George Hudson took us to his office. "Adam is finishing up with a client. He knows you're here and he'll be with us in a jiffy. How are you, Rosanne?"

"Fine, thank you," she said.

"I tried to call you a number of times yesterday, couldn't get through. Phone disconnected, they told me."

"I had a new phone put in today."

There was a knock and Adam Swanson came in, unsmiling. He was lean, frost-haired, young for fifty, usually genial. Today he was tight-lipped and abrupt to the point of discourtesy. He gave us no greeting, no hello, nothing. He said, "I'm glad you're here, Peter. Maybe you can help."

"So?" I said.

"You're a friend of both father and daughter. Perhaps your good influence may ameliorate matters. Sit, sit, won't you?" We sat, and then he sat, on the edge of a chair. "They had a

horrible wrangle yesterday, right out in front of George and myself. Ugly things were said."

Rosanne lit a cigarette. "Why don't you tell him about the day before yesterday?"

"You tell Mr. Chambers, my dear."

"Sure." She blew a plume of cigarette smoke. "My father burst in on rehearsal, acting like crazy. He ranted, raved, demanded that the producer discharge me, threatened to sue for God knows what. They had to put him out. Correct. The Judge was ejected. You can imagine how bitterly embarrassed I was, and still am. Well, yesterday, here, in Mr. Swanson's office I finally told him off. . . ."

Swanson folded his arms. "Do you remember *how* you told him off?"

"I said what I thought. That he had flipped, that he was overboard—senile, crazy, nutty, and a total embarrassment. I told him I'm no longer a child. . . ."

"You said worse." Swanson was grim.

"I have a temper."

"So does your father. And I don't think he's crazy, senile—not at all."

"You've a right to your opinion."

"Tell Mr. Chambers what else you said."

She shrugged. "I don't know. I don't care. I don't remember."

"Well, I remember and so does George and so does your father. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"What did she say?" I said.

"That if he ever got in her way again, she'd kill him. Nice talk, from a daughter to a father. *'I swear, by God, I'll kill you.'*"

The Memory Guy raised both hands as though he were pushing back a falling fence. "Now hold it, Adam! People say wild things in moments of hysteria. Who takes it seriously?"

"The old man took it damned seriously."

"Hell, I'm a grown woman," Rosanne said. "I've got a right to live my own life in my own way. Nobody interferes."

"Your own way may prove very difficult, my dear."

"I'm willing to risk that."

Swanson sat back in his chair, talked directly at me.

"The old man has finally had his fill. You see, Peter, the Judge never wrote a will, no need. There's only Rosanne. No wife, parents, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, cousins—no one but Rosanne. Dying intestate, his estate would go to her—his only next of kin. But now"—Swanson moistened his lips—"he's determined to cut her off—completely."

I looked toward Rosanne.

She sat stiff, stubborn, dry-eyed.

"This office has been instructed to draft a will," Swanson said. "In the circumstances it's no breach of ethics to inform you of its provisions. Young George here gets fifty thousand dollars. The rest of the estate is to be divided in half—half to me and the other half to certain specified charities. The daughter gets nothing."

"Unconscionable and unfair," George Hudson said, "but a person does have that legal right. He can cut off his own flesh and blood without a penny."

Swanson sat forward. "I do believe, however, that the Judge, at this extreme of pique, has gone too far."

"Damn right," I said.

"On the other hand, no will exists as yet. Just remember that, Rosanne. Nothing, as yet, has been executed."

"What's the point?" I said.

"Just this. I've persuaded the Judge—before he acts—to have one final talk with his daughter. Now if you please, Rosanne."

"Yes sir?"

"He's promised to be at your apartment directly after your rehearsal today. That's over at five o'clock, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And it takes you about fifteen minutes from the theater to your place?"

"Yes."

"You'll please go straight to your apartment. And you'll please try to be sensible."

She flared. "Just what do you mean by sensible?"

Swanson slapped his knees and stood up. "Please try to talk some sense into her, Peter. She's stubborn, headstrong, bad tempered. . . ."

"Temperamental," I said.

"This is a matter of many millions," he said. "Hell, I've known this kid since she was born. In all good conscience, I couldn't accept this legacy if I didn't try to persuade her to think carefully about it. All the old man wants is that she quits the stage, no more. Right or wrong, that's all he wants. If she does that, there'll be no will, and we'll all be back in status quo. Just remember—there's no will yet. Now try to talk some sense into her, Peter. . . ."

It was a warm and lovely day and for a while in the cab going to 18th street we just sat and breathed the air and did not talk. Then Rosanne said, "Simply this. Money, per se, just doesn't mean that much to me."

"But, Rosie, you heard the man. This isn't just money. It's millions. That's *money!*"

"You can only eat one steak at a time, wear one dress, one pair of shoes. Nobody's going to talk me out of my life, Peter. Not you, not anybody. I don't need his millions. I can get along on my own. Now let's drop the subject."

I dropped that subject and shifted to another. "What about the Memory Guy?"

"What about him?"

"Are you going back with him?"

She shook her head. "No. That was a mistake. Even my dear father knows that. . . ."

"I don't get it."

"Daddy worked out that marriage. He threw us together constantly and kept us together as often as possible. He told me it would please him if I married George and he told the same to George. I admit there was a physical attraction between us but physical attraction isn't love."

"But you did get married."

"Daddy pressed. George comes from a poor family, he's never had any real money in his life. George believed he was



marrying an heiress with all the perquisites that go with such. And Daddy believed that once I married I would give up the business of career and settle down to having babies. Well, as you know, it didn't work out."

"So?"

"When Daddy cut off all the money, George was hooked to a girl without a dime, and I was hooked to a device that my father had concocted, and I resented that and was nasty to George and George resented that and got nasty with me and so it went, on and on, until poor George was happy to move out."

"But I was under the impression the separation was temporary——"

"No. Neither of us has made a move for divorce simply out of sheer inertia, that's all. But it's obvious that my dear father realizes the selfish trick he played on George and hopes the bequest of fifty thousand dollars will balance the scale. Money talks with Daddy, only sometimes it just doesn't talk loud enough. . . ."

The Anderson apartment was on the second floor of a walkup and the Parole Officer, Tom Murphy, opened the door for us and led us into a small cramped living room. There he introduced us to Jeff Anderson, and to the worn grey-haired woman who was his mother, and to the worn grey-haired man who was his father. All three were seated, looking scared. Tom said, "Stand up, Jeff."

The guy got up. He was thin, sallow, small-boned, and narrow-faced, with long-fingered trembling hands.

"Talk to Miss Hamilton," Tom Murphy said.

"Whadaya want me to say?"

I was holding Rosanne's arm. I felt the muscles constrict.

Instantly she said, "He's the one!"

Mildly Tom Murphy said, "Talk some more, Jeff."

"Whadaya want me to say, Mr. Murphy?"

"Well," Tom drawled. "Say something like 'Tell the Judge I'm going to murder him. Tell your father——'"

"No! Please! No!" The narrow face twisted in a grimace and the boy began to cry. "Please! I'm sorry! Sorry!"

"You admit making these calls, Jeff?"

"I only wanted like to get even. . . ."

"We're going to have to revoke your parole, Jeff."

The worn grey-haired woman said, "I beg you, no."

Rosanne said, "I'd rather not press charges."

I said, "Maybe he's had his lesson, Tom."

Tom said, "Sit down, Jeff. We're going to have a long talk, you and me and your mother and father. . . ."

I went with her to rehearsal and watched and admired. She had an enormous talent, there was no question she was on her way: whether it was worth the sacrifice of millions was not for me to decide. At least she was not fooling herself, she was not relinquishing an inheritance under some form of delusion: she was an accomplished actress.

Later, at five minutes to five, in her dressing room, as she creamed off make-up, I said, "I'm glad you invited me. I enjoyed it."

"How did it go? How was I?"

"Only great."

"Thank you. I wish I could sit here and listen to more. I devour praise, but let's save it for the cab. Dear old Daddy is waiting, you know."

I rode her by cab to her house, but I stayed in the cab.

"Good luck," I said.

I gave the driver my address and he pulled away but after a few blocks I told him to turn back. It was wrong to let her face up to the old man alone, a cold confrontation, each with a deep grievance and both with fierce tempers. The old man was fond of me: at least at the beginning I might be able to pave the way, use whatever small influence I had to try to effect some sort of reconciliation.

The cab stopped and I paid my fare and went up in the elevator and put my finger on the button. There was no answer. I tried the knob: the door was not locked. I went into the living room and saw Judge David Hamilton on the floor,

rigid in death, bleeding from a bullet hole in his forehead. Above him stood Rosanne Hamilton with a gun in her hand.

Detective-lieutenant Louis Parker, Homicide, was the man in charge. While his men worked—fingerprint men, photographers, uniformed policemen, Medical Examiner—I acquainted him with all the details. Then he took the girl aside for quiet questioning and I buttonholed one of the uniformed policemen. "You'll pick up a Jeff Anderson at 2 West 18th and bring him here. And you'll get Tom Murphy at the Parole Office. It's okay with the Lieutenant."

The policeman verified with Parker and departed and I called Adam Swanson at his home. "Please come up to Rosanne's apartment, Mr. Swanson. It's urgent. Thank you." I hung up and called George Hudson. I got his answering-service:

"Sorry, Mr. Hudson isn't at home. Any message?"

"Yes. Tell him Peter Chambers called. Tell him to come over to Rosanne Hamilton's apartment as soon as he gets this message. Tell him it's very important, urgent."

And then I went to where Parker was talking to the girl.

He was pointing at a pearl-handled .22 calibre Smith & Wesson revolver. ". . . and it is your gun, isn't it?"

"Yes, my gun."

"And where'd you keep this gun, Miss Hamilton?"

"Right hand drawer of the desk."

"And now will you repeat exactly what happened here?"

"I came in. The door wasn't locked."

"That didn't surprise you?"

"No. I knew my father was going to be here. He has a key. He needn't have locked the door. I came in and . . . I saw him . . . lying like that . . . touched him. He was dead. The pistol was on the floor. I . . . I picked it up . . . just stood there, bewildered, shocked. I . . . I suppose I would have gone to the phone, called the police, but then Peter, Mr. Chambers, was here."

"What time, Pete?"

"I dropped her off downstairs at about five-fifteen. I came back within the next, oh—five-ten minutes."

The Medical Examiner came to us.

"Time of death?" Parker said.

"Very close. I'd say within a half hour of when we got here."

"How's five-fifteen?"

"It would fit."

"Suppose we give it the full stretch," Parker said. "Between ten to five and twenty after five."

"That would tie it," the Medical Examiner said and went away.

The bell rang. A policeman ushered in Jeff Anderson and Tom Murphy. "Who's that?" Parker said.

"The Anderson boy I told you about."

"Thanks, Pete." The Lieutenant went to the boy at once. "One question, quick. Where were you between ten to five and twenty after?"

"I can answer that, Lieutenant," Tom Murphy said.

"Hello, Tom."

"Hello, Lieutenant. He was at home with me and his parents."

"Okay, that's it. Get him out of here. Thank you, Tom."

In the bustle of their exit, Adam Swanson joined the party.

I was about to greet him when the phone rang. I grabbed it. It was George Hudson. I talked quickly. "Hustle your car right over here, George. There's been, well, trouble, bad trouble. Yes. Right away, please. Good boy." When I hung up Parker was beside me with Rosanne. "That was George," I said to her. To Parker I said, "The husband. He lives only a few streets away. I think you ought to hold up until he gets here. Matter of minutes."

Parker nodded, then said to the girl, "Who knew you had this pistol? Anybody?"

"Everybody," she said. "Everybody who knows me. My father bought it for me. Mr. Swanson got the permit for me."

"And they knew where you kept it?"

"It wasn't a secret."

I went to Swanson and talked with him and then the bell rang and George Hudson was with us and then Parker began his summation. "We've got three ways on this—all of them, of course, involving Miss Hamilton."

"Three ways?" said Adam Swanson.

"First, *her* way. She came in and found him like that and was going to call the police. That has complications, of course."

"What complications?" George Hudson said.

"Well. . . ." Parker jutted his jaw. "The fact that she *didn't* call the police."

"She didn't have time," I said.

"That's *her* story, and maybe it's true. Then the gun was in her hand. She was shocked, bewildered—but that's still *her* story. Then it gets further complicated by the business of the will, the bad feeling between the two of them, and the fact that she made an actual threat before witnesses."

"What's the second way?" Adam Swanson said.

"Heat of passion killing. They got caught up in an argument; maybe he took the gun out; maybe she did—and boom."

"And the third way?" George Hudson said.

"Deliberate premeditated murder."

"Are you crazy?" I said.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But that way she'd have her career *and* her millions."

"*What* way?" George Hudson said.

"She didn't expect Peter Chambers to pop in on her."

"So?" I said.

"Let's project it. She's an actress. She could carry it off."

"Carry *what* off, for Christ sake?" George Hudson said.

"She shoots him, wipes the gun, puts it in his hand, maybe explodes another bullet, and then runs out screaming. What would we have then, gentlemen? We would have, ostensibly, a suicide."

"No," George Hamilton said. "She couldn't."

"Why not, Mr. Hudson?"

"It's just not in her."

"Nonsense, it's in all of us, given sufficient provocation. Her provocation: two-pronged: career and money. If he's dead before he executes his will, she gets it all. Right? And could we disprove that suicide? Hardly—when we're dealing with one whose business it is to dissemble, an actress. She didn't know that Pete was going to walk in on her and she sure did know that the old man was here waiting for her."

"So did Mr. Hudson," I said. "And so did Mr. Swanson."

"But neither of these gentlemen could be involved because neither would have purpose. If the Judge was killed *after* he made his will. . . ." Parker shrugged. "But before? Before—George Hudson would be out fifty thousand dollars. Before?—Adam Swanson would be out millions. No, sir. Where there's no motive, there's no sense. What's the matter, Pete? You look unhappy."

I must have continued to look unhappy because Parker grunted and picked up with routine interrogation. "Mr. Swanson."

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Could you tell us where you were between ten to five and twenty after?"

"At home. George and I left the office together at about four o'clock."

"Anyone at home to corroborate that you were at home, Mr. Swanson?"

"Actually, no. My kids are up at school, and my wife returned from the beauty parlor just as Peter called me."

"Were you here, at this apartment, at any time today?"

"Absolutely not."

"Mr. Hudson."

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"You heard my questions to Mr. Swanson?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Well, how about you?"

"Left the office with Adam. He took a taxi, I walked. It's a beautiful day—I walked all the way home. There I called my Service and they gave me Peter's message. I called back

immediately and Peter told me to come here at once, urgent, and I did exactly that."

"And were you here, at this apartment, at any time today?"

"Absolutely not."

"Now both you gentlemen did hear this girl threaten her father?"

Neither one answered.

"Mr. Swanson," Parker said.

"Yes, I heard."

"Heard what?"

"Heard her threaten."

"Just what did she say? Do you remember?"

Swanson cleared his throat. "She said that if he ever interfered with her again, she'd kill him. She said, '*I swear, by God, I'll kill you.*'"

"You heard that too, Mr. Hudson?"

"Now, please, Lieutenant! This makes no sense at all! I'm certain she didn't mean it. People say ridiculous things in moments of crisis, in the passion of argument. That was no threat."

"Very gallant," I said.

It came out sharp, like a shot.

Heads snapped up. Policemen moved near.

"Why the sarcasm?" George Hudson said.

"Because you and I—we both know Rosie didn't kill her father."

"I don't *think* she did but I *know* nothing. And I certainly don't know what you know."

"I *know* that you killed him."

He rushed at me. A clip on the chin rushed him right back. The cops held him.

"What in hell are you talking about?" Parker said.

"Murder. First degree. Deliberate and premeditated."

"Bastard!" The Memory Guy pulled forward for another clip on the chin but the cops restrained him.

Parker wrinkled his eyes. "What reason, what purpose? The best that could happen to him would be the loss of fifty thousand dollars."



"Not quite," I said. "He's a brilliant young man, with an exquisite legal mind, once chosen to be the legal secretary to Judge Hamilton himself. He knows the law and the convolutions of the law."

"Convolutions," Parker said, but encouragingly.

I blew a sigh. "If Judge Hamilton died before the execution of his will, true, George Hamilton would miss out on a bequest of fifty thousand dollars. But now let us inquire, somewhat more carefully, just what would happen in such circumstances."

"Okay," Parker said. "Inquire."

"The old guy would die intestate. No will."

"No will," Parker said.

"The Judge had no other heir—except his daughter. But there's a rule of law that a wrongdoer cannot profit by his own wrongdoing, isn't there, Mr. Swanson?"

"There is."

"Thus if there were a decision that she killed her father, she couldn't inherit, could she?"

"Correct," Swanson said.

"Then what would happen to the estate?"

"It would devolve to her next of kin."

"Which would be the husband, George Hudson. They're separated but still legally married. But even if his nice little scheme didn't work—even if it was decided that she *didn't* kill her father—then he would still be the legally wedded husband of a woman who had inherited millions, and it would cost her plenty—more than fifty thousand dollars—to buy her freedom when she wanted it. Motive, Lieutenant?"

"Liar!" George Hudson screamed. "He can't prove a word of this!"

"Oh yes I can, Memory Guy."

"Let's have it," Parker said.

"He says he wasn't in the apartment today."

"I swear to Christ I wasn't!"

"I can prove you were, Georgie."

"Not on your life!"

"You just prove that, Peter." And now Parker was very close to the policeman holding George Hudson.

"There's a new telephone in this apartment," I said.

"Telephone!" It was a groan. The gravel in Parker's voice was disappointment. "Now what in hell has a telephone to do with this?"

"It was installed this morning. I used that very telephone to call our Memory Guy. He wasn't at home. I left a message with his Service for him to come here at once. He didn't come right away. He called first."

"So, damn, *what?*" Parker said.

"*Unless he was here in this apartment today—he could not have called.*"

Parker blinked. "Brother, somewhere along the way you've lost me."

"I was with Rosie Hamilton all day—since this new phone was installed. She didn't give the number to anyone. . . ."

"But Information would have it," Adam Swanson said.

"Information would *not* have it. As the telephone man mentioned after he put in the new phone—*it's an unlisted number.*"

"You're beginning to find me again, Peter." And now Parker was smiling.

"George came here pretending it was a social call. The Judge opened the door for him, and they probably exchanged casual amenities. Then George went to the desk, opened the drawer, took out the gun, shot the Judge, wiped the gun, dropped it on the floor beside the body, and blew the joint."

"Knowing Miss Hamilton would arrive at about five-fifteen," Parker said.

"He's a bright young man. He timed it beautifully. The Judge would be warm and bleeding when she arrived—dead in her apartment, killed by her gun. Any way you looked at it—she was in the middle. And what with the threat and the business of the will—a smart prosecutor might work out a real bad bit for Rosie. But any way it went—The Memory Guy stood to profit, but big."

"And the business of the phone number?"

"You've heard me call him The Memory Guy."

"You've hardly called him anything else."

"He's a weirdo, a phenomenon—photographic memory—and quite famous for it, only this trip it kind of kicked back on him."

"Like how?" Parker said, giving me lots of room to make character for myself.

"He knew the phone had been disconnected yesterday. Rosie told him. And she told him a new one was installed today. So when he was here, taking the gun out of the desk, he must have flicked a glance at the telephone plaque, and with his kind of mind the number automatically registered. He *had* to be here in this apartment today to know the number—to be able to call back."

George Hudson was a brilliant young man, with an exquisite legal mind, once chosen to be the legal secretary to a judge of General Sessions. He could bluster and bellow at what he considered random accusations but he could not resist the indictment of unimpeachable logic. He sagged and the policemen held him up. The fight was out of him. He was docile as they led him away.

# With Frame to Match

## (A Johnny Liddell Story)

by

Frank Kane

†

THE DOORBELL BEAT a tattoo, jarred Johnny Liddell out of a particularly enjoyable dream. He burrowed his head in the pillow, tried to drown out the noise and recapture the ecstasy. But whoever it was only leaned harder on the bell.

Liddell swore colorfully, swung his legs from under the covers and grabbed his robe. He stalked across the living room to the door, yanked it open. The anger drained out of him when he recognized Lydia Carson standing in the hallway. She might almost have stepped out of his dream, although she was blonde whereas the other vision had been a redhead. But all the other details dovetailed.

She was even more breathtaking than he remembered. The thick blonde hair was piled on top of her head. Her face was scrubbed clean of makeup, save for a smear of lipstick and some expert tinting over her slanted eyes. She was wearing a full length polo coat, loafers and no stockings.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you like this, Johnny." She brushed past him into the room, and waited until he had closed the door behind her. "I need your help."

Liddell walked over to the lamp on the table next to the couch, snapped it on. Then he turned to her. "What's happened?"

"My kid brother has just been arrested for, murder."

"Where?"

"Powhatan. My home town." She walked over, laid her hand on his arm. "He's being framed, Johnny. I want you to prove it. Ron's no killer."

"How long since you saw your brother?"

A slight frown marred the smoothness of the blonde's fore-

head. "Not since I came to New York. Five years ago. Why?"

"Five years is a long time. People change. Circumstances change."

The blonde's face went cold. "I'm sorry I bothered you." She snatched her hand away from his arm, swung around and high-tailed it for the door. Liddell went after her, caught her by the arm and swung her around.

"Don't get so feisty. I'm not saying he did it." She let him lead her back to the couch. "I'll fix us a drink while you tell me about it."

"That's the whole trouble," she told him, a trace of sulking in her voice. "I don't have too many details. All I know is what the girl told me—"

Liddell poured some scotch over the ice in two glasses, handed her one. "What girl?"

"Her name was Madge Regan. She said she was Ron's girl. He told her to call to tell me they were trying to frame him."

Liddell set his glass down, found a sheet of paper and a pencil, scribbled down the name. "And who's he supposed to have killed?"

"A man named Harvey Bright. Some kind of special prosecutor."

Liddell sighed. "What kind of a town is Powhatan? A lot of gambling? Vice?"

The blonde wrinkled her nose. "It's a Hell-hole. It's right in the mining section. You can buy anything you want as long as you've got the price. That's why I got out as soon as I could."

Liddell picked up his glass, sipped at the liquor. "Your brother ever been in trouble with the law?"

"Just kid stuff. He's always been high spirited."

"High spirited." Liddell sighed. "How high?"

"Before I left there was something about a stolen car, but it was all straightened out and—"

"High enough," Liddell nodded. "Have you heard from him since you left? What he was doing? Where he was working?"

The blonde shook her head. "I guess he was doing all right, though. He never asked for money or help." She eyed Liddell's face anxiously. "You've got to help him, Johnny."

"How about the police?"

"The police?" The blonde made a face as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. "Unless things have changed a lot in five years, the police chief is owned body and soul by the gamblers."

"Like that, huh?" Liddell considered for a moment. "Okay. I'm not making any promises. But I'll take a run down to that garden spot of yours in the morning and have a look around."

The blonde jumped to her feet, ran to him and pasted her half-open mouth against his. After a moment, she broke away. "You'll never know how grateful I'll be."

Liddell grinned. "If that's just a sample, I don't know if I could survive the whole bit. But it'll do your heart good to see me try."

The blonde walked back to the couch, unbuttoned the polo coat.

Liddell whistled noiselessly as she slipped out of it. Under the coat she was wearing only a pair of light blue, silk pajamas, the legs rolled up to her knees.

"I was already in bed when the girl called. I didn't take time to dress. I just grabbed my coat and ran practically the whole way."

"Pretty dangerous for a good looking chick like you to be wandering around the streets in this town at this hour," Liddell told her.

"I know. I was scared half out of my wits. But I had to talk to you." She sat down on the couch, leaned back against the pillows, straining her high, tip tilted breasts against the fragile fabric of the pajama top. "I don't know how I'll get home. It's almost impossible to get a cab."

Liddell dropped down alongside her, was pleasantly aware of the roundness of her thigh against his. "Maybe you'd better stay here."

Lydia leaned toward him, her breath warm and fragrant

against his cheek. "That'd be so nice, Johnny. You sure I won't be a bother?"

She wasn't.

Pennsylvania has many beautiful towns. But Powhatan wasn't one of them. It consisted of rows of streets of squat, soot-stained buildings, a few evidences of green where a bush or a stunted tree managed to survive the grime, the cinders and the fumes that are part and parcel of it. Towering above the town to the south were the hills, scarred by the gaping wounds that were the mine shafts, from which its citizens scraped their living.

Martin Conroy, the town's police chief, was thick-set, red-faced; with a thin, bony nose and a balding pate that showed an inclination to freckle. He sat behind the desk in his office and stared at Liddell with no show of enthusiasm.

"We don't much like outsiders coming in here, stirring things up," he growled. "Especially private detectives." He picked up the credentials Liddell had dropped on his desk, riffled through them, tossed them back onto the desk. "We especially don't like keyhole peeping."

Liddell picked up his papers, stowed them in his pockets. "I wasn't figuring on doing any keyhole peeping. Lydia Carson hired me to have a look at this murder her brother's supposed to have committed."

The chief's face darkened at the word "supposed." He reached over, lifted a fat cigar out of the humidor, tested its firmness between thumb and forefinger. "Little Miss Stuckup, huh? Too good for this town, she figures. Well, maybe the town's too good for her, what with having a brother a murderer."

"That's what remains to be seen. Whether or not he is a murderer."

The chief scowled at him for a moment, then jammed the cigar between his teeth and chewed on it. "I don't know why I should be so good natured, but just to keep you from wasting your time, I'll let you have a look at our cards." He pressed a button on the base of his phone, the door opened



and a uniformed cop stuck his head in. "Give me the file on the Harvey Bright killing."

The cop withdrew his head, closed the door.

Conroy scratched a match, lit his cigar. He rolled it in the center of his lips, drew a mouthful of smoke and blew it at the ceiling.

After a moment, the uniformed cop was back. He dropped a manila folder on the desk, left the office. The chief spilled some typewritten sheets and a glossy print out of the envelope onto the desk. He picked up the photograph, held it out so Liddell could see three signatures on the back.

"This is a deathbed identification by Lenora Ross, Harvey Bright's secretary. She walked in on Carson just after he shot Bright. He gunned her, left her for dead. She lived long enough to pick out his picture." The chief jabbed his spatulate index finger at the other two signatures. "The identification was witnessed by the doctor and nurse taking care of her." He reversed the picture, Liddell could see the resemblance to the blonde. "The picture she picked out was Ron Carson." He dropped the picture on the top of his desk, picked up a typewritten sheet. "Deposition by Estelle Stein, registered nurse, stating she was present when Lenora Ross was shown a stack of pictures and witnessed the identification." He flipped it on the desk, picked up another sheet. "Deposition by Dr. Stanley Regan, resident at Powhatan General swearing to the same thing." He dropped the sheet to the desk, picked up a third typewritten report. "Ballistics report. The bullet in Bright came out of a gun found in Carson's apartment after his arrest—"

Liddell bobbed his head. "Quite a case," he conceded.

"Perfect," the chief blew smoke at him.

Liddell scratched the side of his chin. "Too perfect." He watched the chief replacing the papers in the envelope. "How about a motive?"

"Bright was brought in to check on rumors of vice in town," he shrugged away responsibility. "Seems Carson was running a cat house on the south side. Looks like Bright had the goods on him and was getting ready to lower the boom." He

took the cigar from between his teeth, studied the macerated end. "My guess is Carson either tried to buy him off or scare him off and when Bright wouldn't stop leaning, the kid killed him."

"You find anything to indicate that Bright had any evidence against Carson?"

The man behind the desk replaced the cigar between his teeth, chewed on it for a moment. "Bright's files were ripped apart. Whatever he had was gone." He stared up at Liddell. "So you see, you'd just be wasting your time."

"Well, you understand. I have to go through the motions for my client. Of course, if you tell me I can't—"

"Why should I do that? It's your time if you want to waste it."

"I don't suppose it would be convenient for me to see my client?"

The chief considered, shrugged. "Right now if you want."

Liddell eyed the red faced man suspiciously. "Right now would be fine."

The chief lifted his receiver off its hook. "Call the detention block. Tell Al a guy's coming down to have a talk with Ron Carson. Tell Al to handle this guy with kid gloves. He's a big town private eye out slumming to teach us country boys." He returned the receiver to its hook. "Anything else I can do for you?"

The sceptical look still clouded Liddell's eyes. "If I think of anything, I'll let you know. Where is the detention pen?"

"Basement of the county courthouse. Over on the south side."

Liddell nodded, walked to the door, let himself out.

The red faced man sat chewing on his cigar for a moment, then he reached for his telephone and started dialing.

The jailer was sitting in the outside office of the detention pen, his chair tilted back against the wall, his feet propped comfortably in an open bottom drawer. He had the sallow complexion of a man who didn't get enough sunshine; his eyes were weak and watery. He watched Liddell walking

from the elevator to where he sat with no change of expression.

The private detective stopped alongside his desk. "My name is Liddell. Chief Conroy phoned an okay for me to have a talk with Carson."

The jailer let the front legs of his chair hit the floor. He reached for the big key ring on his desk, stood up. "This way." He unlocked the barred door, led the way through.

There were eight cells in the block, four on either side of the concrete corridor where the lights were lit twenty-four hours a day. None of the other cells in the block were occupied.

The jailer started to insert the key into the lock of the last cell on the right side, glanced up. His jaw sagged, the key ring slipped from his fingers. "Mother of God," he whispered.

Liddell felt a tightening of the muscles in his midsection. He bounded to the side of the jailer, grabbed the bars and stared into the cell.

Ron Carson, in person, looked less like his sister than his photograph had. His eyes bulged as he returned Liddell's stare unblinkingly. He must have been a little over five-eight. Now that his feet cleared the floor by a few inches his eyes were almost on a level with Johnny's.

The belt around his neck had been tied to the bars that protected the set-in light fixture in the ceiling.

Liddell bent to pick up the keys, the jailer recovered enough to reach down and snatch them away.

"Open it up," Liddell urged.

The jailer shook his head firmly. "Not me," he told Liddell. "I'm not touching a thing until the boys from headquarters get here. And that goes double for you." He turned and dog-trotted back to his desk. Liddell stood for a moment, staring morosely at the hanging man, then followed the jailer.

". . . but I tell you I don't know when it happened. I haven't talked to him since breakfast. He was alive then," he was telling the mouthpiece of the telephone. He bobbed his head. "Sure, I understand. Okay, chief. I'll see that nothing is touched." He glanced up at Liddell with his colorless eyes.

"By nobody!" He hung the receiver up. "That was Conroy. He's on his way over. You can wait if you want to see him."

"I've seen all of him I want to," Liddell grunted. He brought out a slip of paper, read the name he'd scribbled on it the night before. "You know a girl named Madge Regan?"

An obscene grin twisted the loose lips of the jailer. "Say, you sure are a detective."

"What's that mean?"

The jailer shook his head in admiration. "A stranger in town and already you got the name of the best piece in town." He eyed Liddell up and down, shook his head. "Not that you look like the type that has to buy it. But then, you can never tell."

"Look, I didn't ask for an analysis. All I asked for is an address."

"Any cabby'll take you where you want to go. Just ask for Madge's Place. It's on the fifty-cent tour along with the statue of Benjamin Franklin in the town park."

Madge's Place turned out to be an old two-story shingle house that stood back about a hundred feet off the road. It was surrounded by a decaying picket fence from which many of the pickets had fallen to rot in the weed-choked front yard.

The cabby braked to a stop at the curb outside, swung halfway around in his seat. He lifted a toothpick from the corner of his mouth, glanced at the macerated end. He flipped it through the open window.

"Not much to look at from the outside," he conceded. "But it's the best we got in town." He checked his wristwatch. "Kind of early for any real action, though."

Liddell pushed a bill through the window at him. "That won't bother me. I'm selling subscriptions to the *Ladies' Home Journal*." He pushed open the door, stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Most of the shades in the front of the house were drawn, it had the appearance of being deserted. Liddell walked up the front steps, rang the bell. After a moment, the curtain on the front door was pulled aside, someone looked him over.

Liddell could hear the chain being removed from the inside of the door, then it swung open.

A tall redhead in a light blue dressing gown stood in the doorway. Her hair cascaded down over her shoulders, the dressing gown sagged open enough in front to make any speculation that she wore anything under it unnecessary. It also gave ample evidence that she needed no artificial assist to the magnificence of her façade.

In the bright light of day, the redhead looked older than her figure would indicate. The merciless sunlight exposed the fine network of lines under her eyes, and the losing fight she was making against crow's feet around her eyes and at the sides of her mouth. She looked tired.

"I don't know you, do I, honey?" she asked.

"We have mutual friends," Liddell told her. "That is, if you're Madge Regan?"

The redhead nodded. "I'm Madge. Who are these mutual friends?"

"Ron Carson. And his sister. You called her last night."

Madge opened the door, invited him into the dimness of the hall. She closed it after her, led him toward a room in the rear of the hall. Through the open door of the big living room, Liddell had a view of four other girls, in varying degrees of undress, sitting around listlessly playing solitaire or sipping on coffee cups. They looked up expectantly at the sight of him, returned to their boredom when he disappeared out of the doorway in the wake of the redhead.

Madge pushed the door to her room open, stepped aside for Liddell to enter. It was furnished with a large dresser and a make-up mirror, a couple of easy chairs with a reading light in position behind one of them and a king-sized bed. The walls were draped with velvet, there was a door leading to a private lavatory.

The redhead closed the door behind her. She walked over to the make-up mirror, poked at her hair with the tips of her fingers. "What makes you think I called Ron's sister last night?" Her eyes sought his in the mirror.

"She came to me for help. Said her brother was being framed for murder. She wanted me to look into it."

The redhead turned around. "He's being framed, all right. But—"

"Was being framed."

Madge's eyes widened, some of the color drained out of her face. "Was?"

Liddell nodded. "He's dead. Supposed to have hung himself in his cell. I just came from the detention cell."

"The dirty bastards. The dirty rotten bastards. They killed him." The redhead walked to the bureau, opened the drawer and brought out a bottle. "I guess I'm next." She spilled some liquor into the two glasses on the top of the bureau.

"Why should they kill you?"

She handed him a glass, twisted her lips into a bitter grin. "They won't. They'll take care of me a better way." She tilted the glass over her lips, drained it. "You think this town is bad? The Organization runs dumps that would make this look like the Ritz. You know what it's like for a white girl in Marrakech or some of the South American seaports? Even if they take a loss on me, they'll do it just to keep other people in line." She walked back to the bottle, spilled some more into the glass. "They're real great at teaching lessons. Once they find out you came here to see me—"

Liddell sighed. "They already know. I asked the jailer for your address." He took a swallow from his glass. "You say Carson was working with Bright? Why?"

"This setup used to belong to Ron. Him and me, we did all right with it. So good that Marty Steel decided to take it over."

"Who's Marty Steel?"

"Who's Marty Steel?" the redhead mimicked bitterly. "Marty Steel is Mr. Big in this town. He represents the Organization and he owns the police department and the mayor's office. He tells them what to do and when to do it and they jump." She took a swallow from her glass, walked to the chair, sat on the arm. "One day he walks in here and tells Ron he's got a new boss. Not a partner. A boss. Steel's taking

over for the Organization and he's going to be real big about it. He's going to let Ron keep running the house for a percentage." She either didn't know or didn't care that the robe fell open, revealing a wide expanse of thigh.

"Just like that? And Carson stood still for it?"

"Not at first. Neither of us did." She slid the gown back off her right shoulder. Her bared right breast was full, round, a trifle over-ripe, a shadow of things to come. She half turned on the arm of the chair so Liddell could see the faint red strips that criss-crossed her back. "Marty has a boy named Denton. Les Denton. He dropped by with some muscle to give us a sales pitch. It was two weeks before I could get on my back. We got the message." She pulled the robe up to cover her shoulder. "But that didn't say we had to like it."

"So when Bright moved in to clean up the town, Carson saw a chance to hit back. Right?"

The redhead nodded. "He got his hands on a copy of the ice list. Last night, he put it in Bright's hands. That was early, like around nine. At about three, two dicks from Conroy's office walk in, grab Ron. They search his room and come up with a gun." She leaned forward with an interesting effect on the neckline of her gown. "Mister, Ron Carson's been my old man for almost five years. I ought to know if he ever had a gun or not. He wouldn't go near one. He was scared to death of them."

Liddell nodded. "Planted, probably. It was the gun that killed Bright."

"They didn't miss a trick. How they did it, I don't know. But they even conned a doctor and a nurse into swearing that Lenora Ross identified Ron's picture as the killer. They're lying in their teeth. Both of them."

Liddell scratched his ear. "Not necessarily. All they did was witness the Ross woman's signature on the back of a photograph she identified."

"So? Isn't that enough? It was Ron's picture."

"Maybe it wasn't." He brought out his notebook, tore two pages out. He scrawled a big "X" on the front of one sheet. "Now sign your name on the back of this sheet." He turned



the paper over, handed her the pencil. She scrawled her name.

Liddell separated the two sheets, showed her that her signature was on the back of a blank page that he had held against the back of the sheet marked "X." "It's an old art faker's trick. He pastes a cheap copy to the back of a valuable painting, then urges the sucker to have it appraised. The appraisal is always much higher than the price, so the sucker signs his name to the back to make sure he gets the right painting. Then, all the dealer has to do is peel the valuable painting off and give him the fake with his name signed on it."

The redhead's jaw slackened. "You mean there were two pictures pasted together?"

"Probably. So when the doctor and nurse were witnessing the Ross signature, they were signing the back of Ron's picture, not the one she picked out."

The blonde took the two pieces of paper, tried it for herself. She swore bitterly. "That's just how they did it. For all the good it will do Ron now."

"We can't do anything for him," Liddell conceded. "But maybe we can even the score and make sure they can't do anything to you."

"How?"

"By doing it to them first."

Madge got up, walked back to the dresser, spilled the rest of the liquor into her glass. She held the bottle up to the light, satisfied herself it was empty. "There's nothing you can do. Get on a plane and get as far away from here as you can. Forget you ever heard about Ron Carson or me. All you can buy for yourself is grief."

Chief Martin Conroy squirmed into a more comfortable position on the oversized couch in Marty Steel's living room. His normally red face was tinged with purple now. He was glaring at a thin, dapper man in a three button Continental suit who was mixing martinis. The slim cut of the suit made the man look like he had been dipped to the waist in black ink, the martinis were blue white.

Marty Steel sat across from the couch, watching the police

chief. He was comfortably rounded, his lips were a red smear in the dish shaped face; his eyes were half-closed, deceptively lazy looking. "I still think killing Carson was a mistake," he told the red faced man.

Conroy tore his eyes away from the thin man. "If your boy had done the job right last night, we wouldn't have to."

Les Denton served the martinis, was unimpressed by the criticism.

"Now, this wise guy from New York is out talking to Carson's broad. Maybe we could fool the yokels with that phony identification bit, but we never would have fooled him. That's why Carson had to do the dutch."

"What about the girl?" Steel wanted to know.

"That's your department. She's your property. Just get her out of here before she starts shooting off her lip," Conroy grunted.

Steel tasted his martini, nodded his satisfaction to the thin man. "Excellent, Denton." He held the stem of the glass between thumb and forefinger, turned it slowly. "What the chief says is right. The girl's got to go. But no more killing. Bring her up here. We'll arrange for her transportation to someplace where she can't give us any trouble." He rolled his eyes to the chief. "Satisfactory?"

"And the private eye?"

Steel shrugged. "With Carson dead, with the Bright case wrapped up and the girl out of the picture, what's there for him to find?"

Conroy considered, bobbed his head. "Sounds okay." He glared up at Denton. "As long as nobody gets careless."

The man in the three button suit smiled. He reached up, flattened the hair over his ear with the palm of his hand. It was fluffed, carefully casual on the top. His eyes were large, liquid. The effect was spoiled by a thin, cruel slit, of a mouth. He barely moved his lips when he talked. "It will all be nice and legal like." He brought a leather holder out of his pocket, flipped it open to show a badge. "I'm a deputy. Remember?" He rolled his eyes to where Steel was sitting. "Bring her here?"

The round man considered, nodded. "You'd better. That way we can keep an eye on her until she's shipped out."

Denton nodded. "Any other instructions, chief?" he asked the red faced man. He managed to make the title sound like a dirty word.

Conroy glared at him, shook his head. After the thin man had left the room and slammed the door behind him, the chief turned to Marty Steel. "I don't like that boy of yours, Marty."

The round man drained his glass, set it down. "I do," he said flatly. "And that's what counts."

Madge Regan had half finished a second bottle by the time the rapping came on the front door. She got to her feet, staggered to the bureau, poured one last slug into the glass, waited. She could hear the door being opened, the sound of voices, then footsteps. She raised the glass to her lips, took a deep swallow.

The door to her bedroom swung open, Les Denton swaggered into the room. He looked around, twisted his thin lips into a grin. "Celebrating something?" he wanted to know.

The redhead ignored him.

His face went an angry white, he crossed to her, caught her roughly by the arm and swung her around. "I asked you a question," he snapped.

She wrenched her arm free. "Don't handle the merchandise."

He sneered at her. "After a couple of days where you're going, I wouldn't stay in the same room with you without a mask," he told her.

The redhead swung her glass, the contents splashed into his face. Denton screamed shrilly as the alcohol stung his eyes, backed away rubbing them with the heels of his hands. Some of the other girls stood in the doorway, formed a semicircle staring in, wide-eyed.

Denton kicked the door closed. He crossed to the redhead, slashed her across the side of the face with the flat of his hand, backhanded her head into position. As she went for his

face with clenched fingers, he backhanded her again. She staggered backward, lost her balance over the arm of a chair, landed in a heap on the floor, her gown hiked over her hips. She lay there sobbing, tears streaking the mascara on her face.

The thin man caught her by the arm, dragged her to her feet. "Let's go." He started pulling her to the door.

"My clothes. Let me pack my clothes," the redhead pleaded.

Denton sneered at her. "Where you're going, you won't need them. You won't have time to put them on and take them off."

In the hallway, the clotted group of girls parted as he dragged the sobbing redhead to the door, down the path to where a car with a red light on its roof and a star on the side of the door precluded any interference.

Down the street, Johnny Liddell flattened into the shadows of a building as the police car rolled past. He walked to the nearest corner, got into the cab he had kept waiting.

"Hey, wait a minute," the cabbie protested. "You didn't tell me the car you wanted me to follow was a cop car."

"I didn't know it would be, for sure." He passed a bill up to the driver, the figure "ten" prominent in the corner of it. "Let's go."

The driver lost his struggle to take his eyes off the bill, lifted it from Liddell's fingers, tucked it in his watch pocket. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I'm in a helluva good spot to find out," Liddell grunted.

Marty Steel lounged in the big armchair, explored the faint stubble along the line of his chin with the tips of his fingers. He eyed Madge Regan with no show of interest.

"You might as well level with me. You sent for the shamus, didn't you?" he asked in an incurious voice. It was more a statement of fact than a question. "Why?"

"They were trying to frame Ron. I—I didn't know you were involved, Mr. Steel. I thought it was the chief—"

"You're a liar," the round man snapped. He reached over to the end table alongside his chair. "Carson delivered this

list to Bright." He waved the paper. "You know what this list is? It's a list of every cop on the force who's on the take and for how much." He leaned forward, waved the list under her nose. "Who did you think was paying that dough? The chief? Or me?" He settled back, studied the redhead from under half-closed lids. "You could have walked away from it. We hang the killing on Carson, let him serve a few years and forget it. You," he shrugged, "you wouldn't even get that. But you had to play it smart, call for a private eye."

"I'd do it again," the redhead told him defiantly.

"She needs a little lesson, Mr. Steel," Denton told the man in the chair. He reached out, caught the neckline of the girl's blouse, ripped it down. Her full breasts spilled out as she struggled to back away.

Slowly, deliberately, the thin man unbuckled his belt, slipped it off. The redhead was back-peddalling frantically, trying to stay out of reach. Denton licked at his lips, shuffled after her. Suddenly, he swirled the belt over his head and lashed out. The redhead screamed as the belt cracked against her flesh with a flat, popping sound. She fell to her knees, buried her face in her hands.

The man in the chair sat watching while the thin man took up position to flog the girl's unprotected shoulders. Neither of them heard the door open.

"I'll trade you, Denton. You get first lick. You swing the belt, get your jollies, I squeeze the trigger and get mine," Liddell's voice broke in.

The thin man froze, the belt held over his head. The round man in the chair moved fast. From somewhere on his person he produced a snub nosed .38 and fired. The slug bit a piece out of the door next to Liddell's head.

Johnny swung the .45 in his fist, squeezed the trigger twice. The heavy bullets slammed the round man back against the cushions. He seemed pasted to them half way up the chair. He tried to lift the .38 into firing position. It slipped from his nerveless fingers, he seemed to settle down into the chair. He laced his hands across his chest in a futile effort to

stem the red flow that was staining the front of his shirt. His head fell forward, his hands dropped into his lap.

For the second it took, Denton stood frozen. The girl had lifted her head from her hands, stared from Liddell to the dead man and back.

Denton moved first. He caught the girl by the arm, twisted it behind her back, forced her to her feet. He held her in front of him as a shield. While he fumbled for his knife, Liddell moved in.

The thin man threw the girl at Liddell. She crashed into him, knocked him off balance.

Denton came up with the knife, tried to cash in on Liddell's momentary disadvantage. The girl had apparently fainted, her arms and legs were tangled with Liddell's. The force of the collision had knocked the .45 from his hand, it lay on the floor just out of reach.

As the thin man slashed out at his face, Liddell managed to disentangle the unconscious girl from him, rolled out of the path of the blade. Relentlessly, the thin man stalked him, knife blade held up in the true style of an expert.

"We've got plenty of time," Denton told him. "You're going to walk to the edge of the terrace and then keep going. And after fifteen stories a few cuts won't show." He circled where Liddell lay waiting, kicked the .45 across the room. Slowly, he moved toward him.

Liddell waited until the thin man was within reach, lashed out with his foot. He connected with the thin man's shin, Denton roared his pain and hopped back on one foot. He massaged his shin, kept Liddell at bay with the blade.

"That goes on the bill, too, shamus," he snarled.

Slowly he started to circle, looking for an opening. Suddenly, Denton made his move. Liddell dropped down and away from the knife, heard it swish over his head, heard the thin man grunt as he missed.

Before Denton could get set, Liddell charged at him, head down, in a body check. His shoulder hit the thin man's midsection, knocked him sprawling on his back.

Liddell threw himself on the man with the knife, caught

the wrist of the knife hand in a crushing grip. Slowly, inexorably, he lifted the hand holding the knife, then smashed the knuckles against the floor. The thin man screamed, tried to free his hand from Liddell's grip.

Johnny continued to smash the thin man's knuckles against the floor until the knife fell from his nerveless fingers. As Denton lay there panting and spitting curses at him, Liddell brought back his fist and slammed it against the thin man's jaw. Denton stopped struggling and spitting curses. The panting turned into a strangled snore, a thin ribbon of red ran from the corner of his mouth.

Liddell got up, satisfied himself that the girl had merely fainted. Then he walked over to the bottle on the table next to the dead man. He started to pour a drink, picked up the piece of paper on the table next to the bottle. Liddell unfolded it, read the names and amounts they were being paid. He whistled softly, walked to the phone.

He dialed the operator, asked to be connected with the police chief.

Conroy's voice was belligerent when he learned the identity of the caller. "What do you want?"

"Just calling to say goodbye, chief," Liddell told him.

The chief failed to keep the note of triumph out of his voice. "So you're taking my advice and getting out of town?"

Liddell shook his head. "Not me. But I figured you might be."

"What?" the police chief roared.

"Marty Steel is dead," Liddell told him. "And I've got the ice list. I'm going to finish the job Carson started and see that it gets into the right hands."

"You won't live even as long as Carson did. When Denton—"

Liddell glanced over to where the thin man was struggling back to consciousness. "Denton? Is he the guy in the tight pants?"

"He's the guy that's going to see that you don't give that list to anybody," Conroy growled.

"I wouldn't count on it, if I were you. Denton just ran out



on the terrace and kept going. That first step is fifteen stories. He knew how narrow-minded the Organization can get when a good setup like this blows up in their face." He glanced at his watch. "I figured you might want a head start before they find out how you fouled things up."

"Wait a minute, you!" the chief blustered.

"You're wasting time. And you're going to need all the time you can get. If I were you, I'd start running. For all the good it's going to do you."

He cut off the protest from the other end by dropping the receiver on its hook.

# Too Much Like Murder

by

Jonathan Craig

†

THE EYEWITNESS' NAME was William Marcy, and he had just seen half a murder. The trouble was that he'd seen the wrong half. He'd seen a man shot to death, but he hadn't seen the person who shot him.

Mr. Marcy's second-floor sleeping room was small and hot, and the fan on the scarred dresser only served to move the baked air from one part of the room to another.

I walked over to the window and looked down across the court at the basement window behind which the homicide had taken place. I could see my detective partner, Stan Rayder, bending down to listen to something the Assistant Medical Examiner was saying as he worked over the body, but I couldn't see the body itself.

"Mind stepping over here again, Mr. Marcy?" I asked.

There was a creak of rusty springs as he got up from the bed where he had been sitting and came over to stand beside me. He was a small, round man with a monklike fringe of sandy-cotton white hair around an otherwise completely bald head. A retired schoolteacher from Indiana, he'd said, and, just now, a very nervous one.

"Tell me about it again, Mr. Marcy," I said. "The whole thing."

"The whole thing, Detective Selby?" he said. "But I just—"

"I know," I said. "But I'd appreciate it. From the beginning, please."

He sighed. "Well, as I told you," he said, taking a neatly folded, very clean handkerchief from his pocket to sponge the sweat from his forehead, "I was standing here, watering my plants there on the sill. There was this elderly gentleman sitting on that bench in the yard over there, and I suppose we

must have glanced at each other at the same moment. In any case, he nodded at me. I was surprised, because I've found that people here in New York—at least here in Greenwich Village—rarely or never nod or speak to strangers. Perhaps you've noticed that, yourself?"

"I've noticed," I said. "Please go on, Mr. Marcy."

"Yes. Well, it was at that moment that I heard the man cry out. That is, the man behind the basement window over there."

"And he said just that one word? 'God'?"

"Yes. It was—well, a cry of anguish, you might say. An appeal. He was standing just back of the window, sideways to it, with his arms straight out in front of him. He seemed to have his hands folded together. Prayerfully, you might say. It was as if he were trying to fend off whoever it was that was going to shoot him."

"And you could see nothing at all of the person with the gun?"

"No."

"You're certain?"

"Yes, I am, Mr. Selby. Yes, indeed."

"And you heard no other voices?"

"No. There was just this anguished cry, and immediately after that there was a shot, and the man fell down. It—it just simply paralyzed me." He paused. "I must have stood there, frozen, you might say, for . . . oh, several moments. I couldn't believe what I'd seen had really happened."

"What about this older man?" I said. "The one sitting on the bench in the yard."

"I'd forgotten about him completely, of course. Then I saw him going in the back door. It must have been twenty or thirty seconds after the shot, I suppose. I really couldn't say exactly *how* long it was."

I nodded. "I understand," I said. "Go on, Mr. Marcy."

"There's nothing more I can tell you, Detective Selby," he said. "I finally came to my senses, you might say, and went down to the pay phone in the front hall to call the police." He took out the handkerchief to sponge at his forehead again.

"All my life I'd dreamed of living in Greenwich Village," he said. "But now I'm not so sure. I've been here only a week, and now I'm not so sure at all."

"It just takes a little getting used to, that's all," I said as I crossed to the hall door. "Many thanks, Mr. Marcy. We appreciate your help."

"Oh, you're most welcome," he said doubtfully. "Yes, indeed."

I went down the back stairs, vaulted the four-foot fence into the court behind the house where the man had been murdered, and let myself in the basement door.

The techs and photographers and print men were working rapidly and silently, as they always do, and despite the number of people in the room, no one seemed to be getting in anyone else's way.

It was a big room, with a workbench and several small power tools grouped in the middle of the floor, and, lining three of the walls, were some twenty or more old-time nickel-odeons of the kind usually seen only in museums. The music boxes were of all sizes and varieties, from one not much larger than the elaborate coin mechanism mounted on top of it, to a huge upright piano with a glass panel in the front which revealed a violin, two cymbals, and a tambourine. Apparently the dead man had been working on another, even larger machine, since it had been drawn close to the workbench, and a complete set of drums was spread out on the bench with an intricate maze of wires, belts and rods still connecting them with the cabinet.

On my way over to where Stan Rayder stood talking with the M.E., I paused to look down at the man on the floor again. He had been in his early forties, I judged, a tall man named Neal Cranston with light brown hair and a prematurely lined face that had known a lot of pain or grief, or both. There was one small bullet hole directly over his heart, and almost no blood at all.

Stan walked over, followed by the M.E., who had arrived after I left the basement to question William Marcy.

"The doc here is sort of in a hurry, Pete," Stan said.

"Yes," the M.E. said, glancing at his watch without, I knew, actually looking at it. "These are busy times at Bellevue, Pete. I was wondering if you'd release the body."

I nodded. "You come up with anything we didn't?"

"No. The D.O.A. would appear to have been killed by a bullet fired from a distance of not more than three feet. I say *appear*. Until I complete the autopsy, nothing's official, you know. I wouldn't even commit myself on his sex."

I motioned to the ambulance attendants standing by with their morgue basket. They wrapped the body in a rubberized sheet, put it in the basket, and followed the M.E. out of the basement.

"Destination Bellevue," Stan said softly, following the basket with his eyes. "Over five thousand homicides a year in this town, Pete. Think of it."

"I'd rather not," I said.

"What'd you find out from the man that called in the squeal?" he asked. "What was his name again? Marcy?"

"Yes," I said, and told him what I'd learned.

Stan shook his head. "Too bad it wasn't the killer he saw," he said. "We already *know* who the victim is." He looked a little surprised about something; but then, he always does. He's a lanky, nail-hard cop with a salt-and-pepper butch cut, and his expression of mild surprise is habitual. There have been occasions when the expression has led hoods to underestimate him—a mistake none of them has ever made twice.

"How about the brother?" I asked. "You talk any more with him?"

"No. I was too jammed-up down here."

"Well, we may as well get at it," I said as I turned toward the stairway that led up to the first floor. "Maybe he's simmered down a little by now."

"I doubt it," Stan said as we started up the stairs. "Hard-nose guys like that heat up easy and cool down slow." He paused. "There's something about that character that just doesn't ring right."

"He's had a pretty rough jolt, Stan."

"I know. But it's more than that. I don't know just what it is, but it's there. There's something off somehow."

We walked along the first-floor hallway to the living room and went inside.

Howard Cranston was still sitting in the quilted leather chair where we had left him, a man nearing seventy with graying black hair, a darker gray mustache, and the kind of deeply-set, smoldering eyes that I always associate with fanatics.

Stan and I sat down on the leather couch across from him and I got out my notebook.

"Well, Mr. Cranston, we didn't get too far last time," I said, making it friendly. "You told us the victim's name was Neal, that you were his brother Howard, and that you'd been visiting with him and his wife for about a week. You told us his wife's name is Elaine, that she isn't here, and that you have no idea where she might be. But, aside from that, Mr. Cranston, I'm afraid we didn't get very—"

"I didn't like your manner," Howard Cranston said in a voice like a muffled bullhorn, his hot eyes fixed on me unblinkingly. "I still don't. Why shoe clerks like you and your companion here should be entrusted with the investigation of a murder, I cannot understand." He wore an old-fashioned hearing aid with a grilled sending unit as big as my hand. The unit was clipped to his shirt pocket, and now he reached up to adjust it. "Nevertheless," he went on, "I've decided to answer your questions."

Stan, who has trouble with his temper now and then, started to say something, but I cut him off in time. "We'll appreciate it, Mr. Cranston," I said.

"In that case, please be as brief and concise as possible, Selby," he said. "I've no particular fondness for any part of this." He had a haughty voice to begin with, and when he added a note of imperiousness, as he did now, he was a hard man to take.

"Suppose you tell us what you did from the moment you heard the shot," I said. "You were sitting on the bench out in back at the time, I believe."

"That's correct," Cranston said. "I heard the shot, came into the basement, and saw my brother lying dead on the floor."

"We understand he cried out just before the shot," I said. "Perhaps you heard him call someone by name, or—"

"I heard nothing of the kind," he said. "I heard the shot, and that is *all* I heard." He gestured toward the hearing aid. "I had this turned very low at the time. In fact, I wasn't really certain I'd heard a shot."

"I see," I said. "And when you went into the basement you saw no one else?"

"No, of course not. If I'd seen anyone, I would have told you so to begin with. I'm as anxious to have my brother's murderer apprehended as you are to apprehend him, Selby. Conceivably even more so."

"And you heard nothing? The sound of someone running away, for example?"

"No."

"How about your brother's wife?" Stan asked. "Elaine. When was the last time you saw her?"

"About half or three quarters of an hour before my brother was killed."

"And you've no idea where she might be now?" Stan asked.

"As I told you before, I do not," Cranston said.

"You think Elaine may have killed him?" I asked.

"I think that's much more than a remote possibility, Selby," he said. "In my opinion, that woman is capable of absolutely anything."

"She ever threaten him?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Any particular reason she'd want to kill him?"

"Yes," he said. "A *very* particular reason. A life insurance policy for \$25,000. In addition, there is this house, which is worth at least another \$25,000."

"They didn't get along?" Stan asked.

"Like the proverbial cat and dog," Cranston said.

"Any children?" Stan asked.



"There *was* a daughter. Linda. She was killed by a car about a month ago. She'd just turned six."

Stan shifted his position on the couch slightly. "Your brother's wife an attractive woman?" he asked.

"*Physically* attractive, yes," Cranston said. "She has the classical features of the cameo. But no wife for a Cranston, gentlemen. No wife, really, for *anyone*. Neal's marriage to her was a ghastly *mésalliance*."

"A what?" Stan said.

Cranston ignored him. "How he could ever have bestowed the name of Cranston on a gutter creature like Elaine has always seemed to me utterly incomprehensible."

"What did Neal do?" Stan asked.

"Do?" Cranston said.

"For a living," Stan said. "With all those juke boxes and power tools down in the basement, I thought maybe he—"

"My dear young man," Cranston said, "no Cranston has done anything for *a living* in better than a century."

"Family fortune, you mean?" Stan asked.

Cranston nodded. "Administered by me. And in Neal's case, my provision was entirely adequate, I assure you." He studied Stan contemptuously for a moment. "As for those contrivances in the basement, they were merely a diversion. A hobby. He enjoyed collecting and restoring them. Why he did, only Neal and heaven knew."

I turned over to a fresh page in my notebook. "Aside from his wife," I said, "who else might have had reason to kill him?"

"No one," Cranston said firmly. "He hadn't an enemy in the world." He paused. "For that matter, he had few or no friends, either. During the last year or so, he'd become pretty much a recluse."

"No gambling debts?" I said. "No involvement in lawsuits? No affairs with married women or—"

"There's no point in your going on, Selby," Cranston said. "Neal was in no difficulty of any kind. I repeat: of *any* kind."

"Still," I said, "someone did kill him. There had to be a reason, Mr. Cranston."

"He play around?" Stan asked.

Cranston looked at him questioningly. "Play around?"

"Oh, come on," Stan said. "Did he have girl friends, or didn't he?"

"No," Cranston said. "In the sense you mean it, absolutely not."

"In *any* sense, then," Stan said. "How about it?"

"Well, I suppose one might call Bonnie Lambert a friend," Cranston said. "But Neal wasn't 'playing around' with her, and she certainly wasn't his 'girl friend.' She was just a girl who came to visit him sometimes. As meaningless as that. A rather pretty child, too, if one's taste runs to the primitive, but hardly one to . . ." His voice trailed off for a moment. "Miss Lambert is, of all improbable things, an artist's model. Need I say more?"

"The point is, she came to visit him sometimes," Stan said. "Why?"

"She was infatuated with him," Cranston said. "I suppose it was the mesmeric effect Cranston men have always had on women. A sort of family curse, as it were." He shook his head. "Poor Neal. Always the innocent bystander. He simply didn't know what to do about her."

"What about his wife?" Stan asked. "What'd she think of all this?"

Cranston shrugged. "Elaine's perspective tends toward the perverse, I'm afraid. She thought it was the most amusing thing imaginable."

"Amusing?" Stan said.

"Yes," Cranston said. "But Bonnie's former gallant—her *ex*-gallant—didn't find it amusing at all. An altogether impossible young man named Wayne. He came over here night before last and tried to drag Bonnie out of the basement. I use the word drag literally. There was quite a scene, really—and all of it so utterly sophomoric."

"You mean there was a fight over her?" Stan asked.

"Very nearly," Cranston said. "For a time there, I was certain there would be."

"I thought you told us he didn't have an enemy in the

world," Stan said. "Now you tell us he was involved in—"

"He was involved in *nothing*," Cranston said sharply. "And if you're implying that a person like Wayne might have killed Neal because of the likes of a Bonnie Lambert . . . well, I must say that's simply much too ridiculous to—"

"Is it?" Stan said. "What makes you so sure?"

Cranston glared at him witheringly for a long moment, and then suddenly got to his feet.

"I'm quite weary of all this, Selby," he said. "I'll remind you that, after all, my brother has just been murdered. Quite frankly, I would like to go to my room and lie down for a while."

I nodded. "All right," I said. "But one thing more, Mr. Cranston. This man Wayne. You know his last name?"

"No, I do not," he said as he started for the door. "You'll have to ask Bonnie Lambert. I understand she works—if that is the word—at the Corey Allen School of Art."

Stan stared after Cranston until the door closed behind him, and then he looked at me and grimaced. "There goes one of my favorite people," he said sourly. "I think I'll start a Howard Cranston Fan Club, Pete. How'd you like to become a charter member?"

I grinned. "I'll think about it," I said. "Meanwhile—"

"Yes," Stan said. "*Meanwhile*, there's a beautiful artist's model to be talked to. And who's going to talk to her? *You*. Not *me*. Oh, no. *I* stay here and mind the store, like always." He raised one eyebrow quizzically. "Right?"

I slipped the notebook back into my pocket and got to my feet. "Right," I said.

The Corey Allen School of Art was in a fourth-floor loft on West Houston Street. There was a life class in progress just now, apparently, but none of the dozen or so students seemed as interested in what they were putting on their canvas as they were in the completely naked girl on the platform. The students were all men, all obviously uptown business and professional types, and I got the impression that, so long as

the girl remained on the platform, none of them would care very much whether school kept or not.

Not that I could blame them. The nude girl was about eighteen, an almost incredibly beautiful brunette with slightly tilted eyes and blue-black hair that fell in loose waves past her shoulders and contrasted vividly with the flawless cream-white body. She stood statue-still, her eyes cast down, her face as expressionless as a doll's.

I walked over to the nearest student. "Where's Mr. Allen?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "Better yet, who cares?"

"The class just sort of runs itself, does it?"

"About half the time he's too boozed up to show at all," he said. "The rest of the time, he's only half boozed, and that's even worse."

"That Miss Lambert on the platform there?"

He nodded. "Yes. But you'd better look while the looking's good. Another couple of minutes now and the show'll be over."

"She have a dressing room?"

He grinned. "Hey, you're not exactly short on self-confidence, are you?"

"It comes and goes," I said.

"Well, good luck, buddy. She dresses behind that plywood partition there, just back of the platform."

I circled the forest of easels and walked back to the partition. Behind it there was a well-gouged, splay-legged card table with a couple of fashion magazines and a coffee-can lid ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, a canvas deck chair with a girl's dress and other clothing draped over it, and a two-foot stack of masonite panels. And that, aside from the litter of more cigarette butts and gum and candy wrappers on the floor, was all.

I sat down on the stack of panels and waited. A minute went by, and part of another, and then I heard the girl's footsteps approaching and I got to my feet again just as she rounded the partition.

She was wearing a yellow terrycloth robe now, and somehow she looked even smaller and younger than she had out there on the platform. When she saw me she stopped and the slanted dark eyes narrowed a little.

"You ought to know this place is off-limits for students," she said. "Please leave."

"Miss Lambert?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "but—" She broke off abruptly, pulling the belt of the robe a little tighter about her waist as she studied my face for a moment. "Cop?" she said.

I nodded. "Detective Selby, Sixth Squad," I said, reaching for my billfold.

"Never mind," she said. "Your face is the only credential you'll ever need, believe me."

"So I've been told," I said.

"They told you true," she said as she sat down on the stack of masonite and crossed her legs. "Well, what is it this time? Another hassle about my being too young for this business, or what?"

"I understand you're a friend of Neal Cranston's," I said.

"Why not?" she said. "Neal's very nice people."

I leaned a hip against the edge of the card table. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Miss Lambert," I said, "but Neal is dead."

There was a soft, almost inaudible intake of breath, and the full lips parted a little, but there was no other discernible reaction of any kind.

"How?" she said. "I mean, what happened to him?"

"Someone shot him."

"My God. . . . But who would want to kill a man like Neal Cranston?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," I said. "Neal's brother told us you were infatuated with Neal, Miss Lambert."

"He was mistaken. I *liked* Neal, yes. I liked him a lot. But I haven't been *infatuated* with anybody since I was fourteen."

"But you did visit him pretty often, didn't you?"

"Not so often. Once or twice a week, maybe."

"Why?"

"I told you. I liked him. He was the only man I ever met who didn't spend all his time trying to get me in bed." She shrugged. "Not that I have anything against bed, of course. It's just that I like to *talk* with a man once in a while, too."

"You know him long?"

"I met him about two months ago, when I went over to his place on a modeling job. One of the magazines was doing a picture spread on those nickelodeons of his, and they thought a girl in one of those old 1890 dance-hall girl outfits might hype it up a little."

"Apparently one of your other friends didn't think your relationship with Neal was 'quite so Platonic,'" I said. "Our information is that he went over there night before last and—"

"That damn Wayne Ferris," she said tightly. "I've tried every way I know to get rid of that nut, but he just won't shake."

"You used to go around with him?"

"I went out with him exactly twice," she said. "And twice was once too often. Ever since then, he's acted like he owns me."

"And very jealous of Neal?"

"He's jealous of anybody that so much as says hello to me. When he found out I posed in the nude here, he almost went out of his mind. He's an authentic nut, friend, believe me."

"Nut enough to kill Neal, do you think?"

"He's nut enough to do *anything*. Once he said that if I took my clothes off in here just one more time, he'd throw a bomb in the door and kill everybody in the loft—including me."

I got out my notebook. "Where's Wayne live, Miss Lambert?"

"The Gifford Hotel, on West Third." She drew up one knee and folded her hands around it, oblivious to the way the movement caused the robe to fall open all the way up to the belt. "There's someone else you'd better think about, too," she said. "A hustler type named Vince Miller." She glanced at me questioningly. "Or maybe you've already been thinking about him."

I shook my head. "It's a new name," I said. "What about him?"

"Well, you probably already know that Neal's wife whored around a little. I don't know with how many, but I do know Vince Miller was one of them. A real ladies' man character, you know. He made out he was just a friend of the family. What a laugh. He may have fooled Neal, but he didn't fool me. The only one he was friends with was Elaine."

"You mean Neal didn't know what was going on?"

"I don't think so. He and Vince got into it one night, but it wasn't over Elaine. That is, not over her and Vince." She paused. "Actually, all three of them got into it. It was over Elaine's drowning some kittens."

"How long ago was this?"

"Oh . . . about three weeks ago, I guess. Neal's cat had this litter of kittens, and he wanted to keep all of them. But Elaine hated that cat—probably because Neal loved it so much—and she told him if he didn't get rid of the kittens, she would. Then one night I was passing the bathroom on the first floor, and she called me in there and told me to look in the bathtub. She'd filled it all the way up and thrown the kittens in there, and they were drowning."

She shook her head slowly, her lips compressed. "It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen. They were so tiny and helpless and . . . and the most horrible thing of all was the look on Elaine's face. She was *enjoying* herself. She was having so much fun she could hardly stand still. She kept laughing and pointing at the kittens and yelling for me to look at them. Oh, you just can't imagine what it was like, Mr. Selby. To see someone take such pleasure in something like that was . . . was . . ."

She broke off for a moment, her lower lip caught between small white teeth. "It was like a nightmare. And when Elaine saw how it was affecting me, it pleased her all the more. It made me so sick and weak that I couldn't get the kittens out in time to save them. I tried the best I could, but I was shaking so much and so sick at my stomach that I couldn't even hold on to them. They all died. Every poor little kitten



died." She looked away from me, and her eyes were very bright. "That bitch," she said. "That miserable, damn bitch. It was the one and only time in my life I ever really felt like killing someone."

I didn't say anything for a few moments. Then, "And you say this led to trouble between Neal and Vince Miller?"

She nodded. "Neal came up from the basement to see what all the crazy laughing was about. When he saw what she'd done, he grabbed her by the shoulders and started shaking her. Vince was out in the living room, and Elaine yelled for him to come protect her. All Neal did was shake her, but you'd think he was trying to kill her. Anyway, Vince came running in and jumped on Neal, and Neal knocked him out. Then Neal put cold towels on his face until he came to again. He told Vince he was sorry, and Vince said he'd lost *his* head too, and so they sort of patched things up. At least on the surface. But Vince had blood in his eye, and plenty of it."

"You see him around there again after that?"

"No. But that doesn't mean he wasn't, of course."

"He sounds like a man I'd like to talk to," I said. "You know where he lives?"

She shook her head. "All I know about that hustler is that I wouldn't turn my back on him for a second." She got to her feet, crossed to the deck chair, and reached beneath the dress draped over it for some wisps of underclothing. "Now, how about turning *your* back for a while? I'd like to get dressed."

"I was just leaving," I said. "Many thanks, Miss Lambert. You've been a lot of help."

"I hope you get him," she said quietly as I walked past her.

"We will, Miss Lambert."

"Or her," she said.

I paused. "Her?"

"It might have been Elaine, mightn't it?"

"It might."

"If that's the way it turns out, maybe we can get them to change the execution laws. Just this once."

"Change them?" I said. "Why?"

"Because I'd like to see her drown," she said in a voice

so taut it trembled. "I'd laugh, and point, and just generally behave myself—exactly the way Elaine did when she drowned those little kittens."

The man who answered my knock on the door of Room 302 at the Gifford Hotel was in his early twenties, a six-footer with a thick tangle of hair the color of wet sand, a sullen, blunt-featured face, a weight-lifter's chest and shoulders beneath a grimy T-shirt, a waist like a teenage girl's, and almost no hips at all.

"Good morning," I said. "Are you Mr. Wayne Ferris?"

"So what if I am?" he said. "Who're you?"

I showed him the tin. "My name's Selby," I said. "Mind if I come in?"

He hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and stepped back to let me pass inside. I sat down in the nearer of the room's two ratty chairs. Ferris kicked the door shut with his heel, slouched over to the other chair, and dropped into it heavily.

"All right, Commissioner," he said. "What'd you want to talk about?"

"Neal Cranston," I said. "I understand you had a little trouble with him, night before last."

"So it's Cranston, eh? I might've known that spook would go crying to the cops."

"Cranston's dead, Mr. Ferris," I said.

"Oh? Dead, eh? Well, now ain't that a shame. Remind me I should send flowers."

"He was murdered," I said. "Now, suppose you tell me about that trouble."

He fixed me with an icy glare. "In other words," he said, "you think it might've been me. Right?"

"In other words, I want to hear about that fight."

"Somebody's handed you a crock, buddy. Hell, there wasn't any fight. I just got the guy riled up, that's all."

"I understand you dragged Bonnie Lambert out of his basement."

"All right, so I did sort of help her along a little. So what?"

He laughed shortly. "What'd she tell you? That I knocked her on the head and drug her along the ground by her hair like a caveman or something?"

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Neal? Night before last."

"You know him pretty well?"

"I didn't know him, period. That was only the second time I ever saw him."

"How'd you come to be at his place?"

"I followed Bonnie over there."

"Why?"

"Who knows? I've got this thing for her, that's all. She turns me on. She's got me so wacky I can't even hold a job any more."

"Where were you at nine o'clock this morning?"

"Is that when Neal got it?"

"Just answer the question, Ferris."

"I was here. I tied one on last night, and I didn't feel so good. I just got up about half an hour ago."

"What happened over at Cranston's?" I asked. "Take it from the time you got there."

"Well, his wife came to the door, and she laughed and said, 'Oh, it's you again,' and let me in and said Bonnie was down in the basement with Neal. I'd come after Bonnie once before, see, and so Mrs. Cranston knew what I was there for. She thought it was funny as all hell."

"Funny?"

"Yeah. You know—like she figured maybe Neal and I would try to climb each other. She was all excited, like she was hoping it was going to happen."

"But it didn't?"

"No. I just went down in the basement, where he had that workshop, and I told Bonnie, I said, 'Okay, let's go,' and she said something like 'Nuts to you, Buster,' or something, and went right on talking with Neal. The guy didn't scare easy, I'll say that for him. He was giving her a lecture on old coins—about how you oughtn't never to clean them

because that knocks down their value. He had this coffee can with a lot of old nickels in it that he'd found in some of those old-time juke boxes he had in there, and he was showing them to her and giving her this lecture on them, like he was some kind of a big-noise professor from Columbia or something. They kept right on talking, just like I wasn't there. It p.o.'d me plenty."

"And so you grabbed Bonnie and—?"

"Yeah. I grabbed hold of her arm and started for the stairs. And then Neal started over and said to cut it out, and so I let go of Bonnie's arm and started to square off with him. But Bonnie said not to cause any trouble and she'd go with me peaceful, and we left."

"And that's all that happened?"

"That's the whole thing. Complete. After we got outside, Bonnie ran and jumped in a cab and made the driver take off before I could get in with her." He shook his head. "What a gorgeous young piece like Bonnie could see in a guy like Neal Cranston, I don't know. It just plain don't figure."

"How about this other time you were there?"

"It was about six weeks ago. It was the same deal exactly, except Neal didn't try to butt in. I just told Bonnie to come on, and she did. And that was that."

"You know a man named Vince Miller?"

"Vince Miller? No. Who's he?"

"A friend of Mrs. Cranston's."

"You mean 'friend' the way I think you mean it?"

"Yes."

"Uh-huh. Well, I don't know *him*, but she's got another guy—some yo-yo named Roy. He was there the first time I went after Bonnie."

"You know his last name?"

"No. But he's one mean stud, that guy. He got the idea I was there to romance Mrs. Cranston—don't ask me why—and for a while I figured there was going to be some blood around there. But then Mrs. Cranston finally convinced him it was Bonnie I was after, and he more or less cooled out

a little." He paused. "I don't know what it was about him, but he was the first guy that it ever shook me up just to look at him."

I got out my notebook. "Tell me what you can about him," I said.

"What's to tell? He just started to lean on me the second I showed my puss over there, that's all."

"What'd he look like?"

"Well, big—that's for sure. Bigger'n me, even. And about forty, I guess, and dirty blond hair and these damn eyes—kind of yellow, you know? Just like some kind of damn animal. A panther, maybe."

"You ever see him again after that?"

"No. And between you and me, I don't ever want to."

"Think hard, Ferris," I said. "The more we know, the better for everybody."

"I know," he said. "You think I'm stupid? Man, I ain't hurting to be the patsy in this thing—not one bit."

I dropped one of my cards on the bed and got up to leave. "If you think of anything else, give me a call at the number on there," I said.

"Sure," he said as I opened the door. "Like you said—the more you know, the better for everybody." He laughed, a little hollowly. "For *almost* everybody, anyhow."

There was a phone booth in the Gifford's small lobby, and I used it to call Stan Rayder.

"Any developments over there?" I asked.

"No," Stan said. "Mrs. Cranston never showed up, though, so I asked Communications to put out an alarm for her. How'd you make out with your artist's model?"

I filled him in on my talks with Bonnie Lambert and Wayne Ferris. Then, "So it looks like Mrs. Cranston had at least two lovers," I said. "Vince Miller, and the Roy that Ferris told me about. Is Howard Cranston around?"

"I think he's still in his room."

"Ask him what he knows about Miller and this Roy," I said. "I'll hang on."

Stan was back on the wire in less than two minutes.

"Howard says he doesn't know who this Roy could be, but he thinks Vince Miller might be a man named Vince he overheard Mrs. Cranston talking to on the phone one day. He got the impression he had something to do with The Hub. You know, that saloon on MacDougal."

"Good," I said. "I'm just around the corner from there now. I'll give it a look."

"Well, let's hope you do better with Miller than we're doing with this basement."

I said so long, hung up, and walked around the corner to The Hub.

The cocktail lounge was small and cool and dim, and, aside from the bartender, completely empty.

"Good morning, sir," the bartender said as I took the stool nearest the street end of the bar. "What'll it be?" He was about thirty, I judged, a slim-bodied man with dark hair, a widow's peak, long sideburns, careful green eyes, and a face just a little too sharp-featured to be called handsome.

"Good morning," I said. "Would you know where I could find Mr. Vince Miller?"

He smiled. "You've already found him," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm told you're a friend of Mrs. Neal Cranston's," I said. The smile went away. "So that's it," he said. "You boys work pretty fast, don't you?"

"You know about Neal, then?"

"Yes. A reporter from the *Mirror* was just in. He told me Neal had been killed." He said it matter of factly, as if he were replying to a question about the progress of a baseball game.

"I take it that it doesn't mean much to you," I said. He shrugged. "Why should it? The guy was nothing to me." "And Mrs. Cranston?" "And Mrs. Cranston is nothing to me, either." "I heard it a little differently."

"Well, then you heard how it used to be. I used to give her a pretty steady play. But no more."

"Since when?"

"Since when did I stop? Since one night when she and Neal and I got into a little fracas." He picked up a shot glass and began polishing it with his bar cloth. "That's what you're leading up to, isn't it? The fracas?"

"Yes."

"And that makes me a suspect, does it?"

"I wouldn't go that far, Mr. Miller."

He grinned crookedly. "You wouldn't? The hell you wouldn't. But you've got the wrong boy. I haven't seen either Neal or Elaine for—well, I guess for almost a month now. She'd call here and try to set up a date, but I wasn't having any."

"Why not?"

"Because I couldn't even stand to look at her any more. I've got a pretty strong stomach, but not that strong." He shook his head. "That fracas started because Elaine was drowning some kittens in the bathtub, and Neal jumped her. And then she yelled for me, and I came in and tried to pull him off her. But he slugged me. I hate to admit it, but he knocked me cold." He paused. "But what I'm getting at, is when I saw what she was doing to those kittens, it was just too much. She had a look on her face like—Christ, I don't know what. She didn't even look human."

"I thought Neal had knocked you out. How could you have seen what Elaine looked like?"

"He was shaking her, sure, but she kept twisting around so she could see the kittens drowning in the tub. And there was a girl there, I just remembered—a Bonnie somebody—and she was trying to get the kittens out, but she was being sick at her stomach at the same time and she couldn't do it. And then Neal slugged me and the lights went out."

"And that experience cooled you off about her?"

"It froze me off, mister. I couldn't any more play around with Elaine after that than I could flap my arms and fly. I still get this queasy feeling, just thinking about it."



"I see," I said. "Just for the record, Mr. Miller, where were you about nine o'clock this morning?"

"Home. I've got a furnished room, up on Tenth Street."

"Anyone see you there at that time?"

"No." He put the shot glass down and picked up another. "And so if I was a warm suspect before, by now I ought to be red hot." He paused, looking at me along his eyes. "Or wouldn't you go *that* far, either?"

"No one's accusing you of anything, Mr. Miller."

He smiled sourly. "Not out loud, anyhow."

"Was Neal in any trouble, do you know?"

"If he was, he kept it to himself. So did Elaine."

"Any enemies?"

"Not that I know of."

"Did anything seem to be bothering him?"

"Well, there was *always* something bothering him. He was just that kind of man—always down in the mouth. And when his little girl got killed by that car, it really tore him up. It almost killed *him*, too." He paused. "She was a little beauty. Linda. Sweet as hell. And that's another thing that soured me on Elaine. The very next night after the accident, she was after me to climb in the hay with her. I'll tell you something—I'm just not all that sophisticated."

"You know anybody who might want Neal out of the way?"

"No."

"Does that include Elaine?"

"Well, now you've got me. After the way she was about Linda and those kittens, I wouldn't be surprised at anything she did. Not a damn thing."

"You acquainted with any of her other men friends?"

"No. I didn't even know she had any."

"Ever hear her mention someone named Roy?"

"Roy . . . No. Not that I remember. In fact, I don't remember her ever saying anything about any other men at all."

I spent another ten minutes with him. Then, when it became obvious that he couldn't—or wouldn't—add anything to what I already knew, I gave him one of my cards, told him to call me if he did recall anything, and left the lounge.

When I got back to the Cranston residence, I used the upstairs phone to call the Bureau of Criminal Information and ask whether they had yellow sheets on either Wayne Ferris or Vince Miller. Then, while I waited for BCI to call back, I phoned Stan's and my squad commander, Acting-Lieutenant Barney Fells, to fill him in on our progress in the investigation so far. A few minutes later, BCI called to say they had nothing on either Ferris or Miller, and I went downstairs to the basement workshop where Neal Cranston had been murdered.

Stan Rayder was leaning against one end of the big nickelodeon Cranston had been repairing at the time of his death, his thin, angular face registering its usual mild surprise as he watched the fingerprint techs working with their powders and lifting tapes.

"Come up with anything yet?" I asked.

He shook his head. "The way things're going, we'll be here all afternoon." He reached into his pocket and handed me a sealed telegram. "This came for you about half an hour ago, Pete."

"Funny, that it'd be addressed to me here," I said as I opened it.

"Yeah—it's kind of had me wondering. I started to open it, but then I thought maybe I'd better not."

The telegram had been sent at 10:46 a.m., and was unsigned. It read:

NEAL CRANSTON MURDERED BY ROY STARK STOP  
642 WEST 11TH MANHATTAN STOP GUN HIDDEN  
BENEATH PASSENGER SEAT HIS TRUCK STOP

I passed it over to Stan. He read it, read it again, replaced it carefully in its envelope, and returned it.

"Well, good-by again, Pete," he said. "It was nice of you to drop in. Come back again sometime when you can stay a little longer."

"Good-by," I said, and left for a talk with Roy Stark.

Six forty-two West 11th Street turned out to be a soot-blackened brownstone, one in a row of identical brownstones that stretched in an unbroken line from the Hi-Lo Tavern on one corner to the McGinnis Cut-Rate Drug Store on the next. And, as luck all too seldom had it, I found a parking space for the unmarked Department sedan less than a quarter of a block away.

But Roy Stark, I discovered, had had even better luck with his truck. A small moving van, lettered STARK TRANSFER, was parked directly in front of the house.

I opened the door on the passenger side, felt beneath the seat, and drew out something small and hard and heavy, wrapped in a sheet of newspaper.

It was a .38 caliber Colt Cobra, a stub-barreled revolver identical with the one I wore on my belt. Handling it carefully to avoid obliterating any possible prints, I broke it and found that, with the exception of one empty cartridge, still smelling of burned powder, it was fully loaded. I rewrapped it in the piece of newspaper, put it in the side pocket of my jacket, and went up the steps to the brownstone.

In the foyer, I ran my eye along the row of mailboxes, but there was no name card for Stark. I had just started to ring the bell for the super, when the inner door opened and a heavy-set woman carrying a pail of water and a scrub mop stepped out. She was about fifty, with short, uncombed hair like steel wool, a red, almost perfectly round face, and a tiny, lipless mouth like a buttonhole.

"Who're you looking for?" she asked in a thin rasp of a voice laced with whiskey and fatigue.

"The super," I said.

"That's me," she said. "What'd you want?"

"I wanted to see Mr. Stark," I said. "But I don't find his name under—"

"He don't live here no more, my friend," she said. She set the pail down with a bang, shoved the mop into it, and began to scrub the tile floor of the foyer. "They come and hauled him out of here last night."

"They?"

"The Feds," she said. "And with him still owing me twenty bucks on his rent, too."

"What kind of Federal officers were they?"

"How should I know?" She shrugged. "From what I could hear, it had something to do with him passing phony money. So maybe it was the F.B.I."

"Secret Service," I said, turning to leave. "And thanks very much, miss."

"If you should see him, remind him about that twenty bucks," she said.

I walked down to the drug store on the corner, went into the phone booth, and called a friend of mine at the regional office of the Secret Service on Church Street.

It was true, I found. Roy Stark had been in custody since shortly after midnight, charged with possession and distribution of counterfeit ten-dollar bills.

The certainty that Stark couldn't have killed Neal Cranston didn't mean positively that the person who had tried to frame him with the anonymous telegram and the planted gun was the murderer, or at least knew who the murderer was. Not positively. It just meant the probability was so strong that, pending contrary developments, it had to be treated as a working fact.

Which meant that if I could learn the identity of the person who had sent the telegram, the odds were very great that I would at the same time have learned the identity of the killer.

I drove to Headquarters, left the gun with Ballistics for comparison tests with the bullet removed from Cranston's body, and then got busy on the telephone.

First, of course, I called Western Union, from whom I learned both that the telegram had been phoned in at 10:42 from a pay station and the number of the telephone itself.

Next, I called the New York Telephone Company, told them the number of the phone, and was informed that it was the number of a pay phone at the Hartley Cigar Store on Sixth Avenue, about midway between the house where Stark had been arrested and the one where Cranston had been murdered.

Twenty minutes later I was talking with Mr. George Hartley, the elderly proprietor of the cigar store.

"You can see for yourself," he said, measuring me with shrewd rheumy eyes. "From behind the counter here, you can't see that booth at all. People come in by the side door all day long and go out the same way, and I never see them. But this call I'm talking about was made around the time you're interested in." He paused. "If there hadn't been so many *pings*, I wouldn't have noticed it at all. There must've been at least thirty of them, maybe more. I got to wondering why the guy hadn't asked me to change some of the nickels for quarters, so he wouldn't have had so many coins to drop. If you didn't know those were nickels he was putting in there, you'd have sworn he was calling Honolulu."

"How did you know they were nickels?" I asked.

"By the sound, naturally. Dimes and quarters and nickels all sound different, you know. They've all got a different *ping*. And these were all nickels—every single one of them. In all the time I've been here, I don't remember anybody ever—" He broke off, peering at me intently. "Hey, what's the matter? You look like I just said something that—"

"You did," I said. "Believe me, you really did." I handed him a fifty-cent piece. "Mind changing this for me?" I asked. "I want to call the phone company and have somebody open that coin box."

He handed me my change. "What'd you want to open it for?"

"So I can take a look at those nickels you heard," I said.

"So you can . . . ?" he began incredulously, and then slowly shook his head. "Maybe it's the heat," he said.

By the time I had done all that had to be done and returned to the Cranston residence, it was a quarter of four. Except for Stan Rayder and Cranston's older brother, Howard, the basement workshop was deserted.

"Welcome back," Stan said. "I was just about to put out an alarm for you."

Howard Cranston was sitting on a wooden stool, blue-

veined hands folded on the heavy silver knob of a handsome walking stick, a very old man who seemed somehow to have aged even more in the hours since I had last seen him. But there was still the same arrogant set of the head and shoulders, and the sunken eyes beneath their iron-gray brows still smoldered just as fiercely in the proud patrician face.

I drew Stan aside, spoke to him for a few moments, and then walked over to stand near Howard Cranston. Stan leaned back against the enormous disemboweled music box beside the workbench and folded his arms.

"I don't see the coffee can Neal used to hold the old nickels he found in these machines, Mr. Cranston," I said. "But I did find some of the nickels themselves. Thirty-six of them, which is exactly what it cost you to send me that telegram. Thirty-six very tarnished Liberty Head nickels—and the last Liberty Heads were minted in 1912." I paused. "I assume you used them to avoid calling attention to yourself by asking anyone for change."

Cranston compressed his lips, looking at me as if I had just crawled out of a crack in the floor.

"After I found the nickels," I said, "I had the cab companies check their trip sheets. That led me to the driver who picked you up in front of Roy Stark's place, where you'd gone to plant the gun, and let you out at the cigar store where you sent the telegram. The same thing goes for the driver who brought you the rest of the way home. And the gun you hid in Stark's truck was the one that killed your brother. Our ballistics men have—"

"How dreary this all is, really," Cranston said in his imperious, cellar-deep voice. "If you please, my dear Mr. Selby—spare me any further display of—"

"We know *you* didn't kill Neal," I said, "because we have a witness who saw you sitting outside in the court at the moment Neal was shot. But you *do* know who did it. You know, and you tried to frame Roy Stark for it. But that attempt boomeranged, because Stark has been in a jail cell since late last night." I paused. "You may as well tell us now as later, Mr. Cranston. Who killed your brother?"

Cranston sighed. "Much as I dislike to agree with you on *anything*, Mr. Selby, I'm forced to concede that you're right. For the most depressing reasons imaginable, I find there's no point whatever in not telling you the whole wretched story."

Stan started to say something, but Cranston held up a hand to stop him.

"First of all," he said, "I may as well state the ugly fact that Neal was *not* murdered. He committed suicide. And since I couldn't bear to think of having the name of Cranston dishonored by such a craven act of cowardice, I endeavored to make his suicide appear to be a murder. To strengthen that appearance, and for certain other reasons, I tried to involve Mr. Stark."

"Why did your brother kill himself?" Stan asked.

"Because he was a weakling, of course," Cranston said. "His character was flawed. He was forever brooding about the inhumanity of mankind. Poor Neal—he simply could not cope with the more brutal realities of this life of ours. Most people manage not to think about them, just as they manage not to think about the inevitability of their death. But Neal thought of little else. His agony was cumulative, so to speak, and each new outrage was less endurable than the last. The next to the last blow was the death of his daughter Linda."

"And what was the last?" Stan asked.

"Don't interrupt, if you please," Cranston said. "Linda was his whole world. With her, a small child, he could extend love without fear of betrayal—as one can with a small pet of some kind." His voice had grown a little softer, his delivery a little slower. "Then this morning, while I was sitting on that bench just outside the window there, I heard Elaine deriding Neal because he was still grieving over Linda. And then that gutter creature, in an unbelievable excess of bitchery, told Neal that Linda wasn't his—that she had been fathered by Roy Stark. . . . And so, you see, the one person Neal could love and trust, the be-all and end-all of his existence, was herself a living lie." He glanced at Stan. "*That* was the last blow. Neal had brought his gun down here to clean and oil it. When Elaine told him Linda wasn't his, he . . . killed himself. When



I heard the shot, I thought Neal had killed Elaine. But when I came in here, Neal was lying on the floor, dying, with the gun still held in both hands. He had held it out in front of his body and shot himself in the heart."

Which would, I reflected, account for Neal's having extended his hands "prayerfully," as the eyewitness had told us he did.

"Elaine was enjoying the spectacle immensely," Howard said. "Her face was twisted into the most bestial look conceivable."

"And you say Neal was still alive?" Stan asked.

"He died as I knelt down beside him," Cranston said. "I was torn by emotion, of course, but uppermost in my mind was the shame of having the world know that a Cranston had taken his own life. And then somehow my mind cleared, and I saw how his death might be made to look like the work of another. I pried the gun from his hands, and as I did so, it occurred to me that I might be able to involve Roy Stark—and thus punish him for disgracing the name of Cranston by his adultery with Elaine. I'd eavesdropped on more than one of their conversations, and I knew he was a free lance mover. Later, I found his address in Elaine's personal phone book."

"What would you have done if Stark's truck hadn't been in front of his house?" Stan asked.

"I'd simply have kept returning until it *was* there," Cranston said. "I could have carried out my plan tomorrow, or a week from now, and the result would have been the same. He turned his gaze to me. "As you surmised, I very stupidly availed myself of the coins in the coffee can, and for exactly the reason you named. Neal had taken the can upstairs yesterday afternoon. And, as you have undoubtedly *also* surmised, I didn't go to my room to lie down this morning, as I told you I was going to do. I spent a very busy hour trying to make Mr. Stark appear to be a murderer."

"I suppose you realize that impeding a police investigation and trying to frame Stark will put you in prison for the

rest of your life," Stan said. "You're already an elderly man, and—"

"You're quite right about my spending the rest of my life in prison," Cranston said. "But you're very much mistaken about the reasons. It will be while I await electrocution." He smiled coldly. "You see, Elaine's admission that she had dishonored the name of Cranston by her adultery with Stark had enraged me, and so when I came in here and saw her gloating over Neal's death agony, and realized that she would let the world know that a Cranston had committed suicide, I did *this*." He twisted the handle of his walking stick slightly to the left and withdrew a good two feet of gleaming sword blade. "Unfortunately," he said, inserting the blade in the walking stick again, "its character was flawed—just as Neal's was. When I thrust it into Elaine's back, some six or eight inches broke off and remained in her body. It was embedded in the bone, and try as I would I could not remove it."

There was a long silence. Then, "What did you do with her body?" I asked.

Cranston's eyes roved the length of the big nickelodeon by the workbench. "Your partner is leaning against her coffin at this moment," he said. "That's why I told you there was no point in not revealing the whole story. I knew the shot would bring the police, and I put her body in that music box, thinking I'd have an opportunity later to dispose of it properly. But now that opportunity will never come, and it would be only a day or two before her presence in there made itself known. And then, too, there's that piece of sword in her back."

I walked over to the nickelodeon and shone my flash down inside it, while Stan pulled away some of the rods and wires which still connected it with the set of drums on the workbench.

Then, just as my flash picked up the white curve of a thigh, Stan, in some way, tripped the starting mechanism, and suddenly the basement reverberated with a pounding, clanging, almost deafening rendition of "Camptown Races."

It was the most macabre music I had ever heard.

Stan was yanking furiously at the wires and rods. "How do you stop this thing?" he yelled at Cranston.

"I don't know," Cranston said. "Perhaps—like so many other unpleasant things in this life—it will just have to run its course."

# The Shakedown

by

Richard Deming

†

EL PATIO CLUB was originally named, I imagine, by someone who liked the sound of the words but knew no Spanish, for there is nothing within sight of it even faintly resembling a courtyard. It is a huge gray stone building of two stories, from the outside resembling a prison.

But inside it is magnificent. Three enormous rooms run nearly the width of the building from front to rear. As you enter through the heavy bronze double doors, you find yourself in a cocktail lounge so glittering, you automatically brace yourself to pay double the normal rate for drinks. To the left of the cocktail lounge an archway leads to the ballroom, where a five-dollar cover charge authorizes you to watch the floor show while you imbibe your expensive drinks. To the right a similar archway leads to the dining room, where the cuisine is so wonderful you have to make reservations if you expect to get a table earlier than nine P.M. even on a Monday, the slowest night.

I didn't have a reservation, but it was Monday and past nine P.M. when I walked in the front door. By that time most of the dinner crowd had finished eating and had moved across to the ballroom. Through the righthand archway I could see that only a half dozen tables in the dining room were still occupied.

The cocktail lounge was nearly deserted too. One couple sat at the bar, another at one of the small tables against the wall. Aside from that there were only four people in the room: Al the barkeep, Marmaduke Greene, affectionately known to his friends as "Mouldy," Fausta Moreni, El Patio's blonde proprietress, and a dark, wide-shouldered stranger.

There was an interesting bit of activity going on, though.

Mouldy Green was escorting the dark stranger to the door.

Mouldy is an institution at El Patio. As official customer greeter, evenings he stands just inside the main entrance with a hideous smile on his face, calling celebrities by their first names (generally the wrong ones), addressing dignified dowagers as "Babe" or "Toots," and in general acting the part of genial host with earthy informality. Once they got over the initial shock, customers loved it.

He has another, unpublicized function also. The place is too high-toned to have an official bouncer, but on the rare occasions someone gets out of line, Mouldy fills the office beautifully. About the size of a rhinoceros—detractors have accused him of having the brain of a rhinoceros too—a friendly hint from him is usually enough to stem drunken belligerence. Tonight he seemed to be performing his unpublicized function, and apparently a hint hadn't been enough.

Mouldy had the dark man by the scruff of the neck and the seat of the pants. Though the man must have weighed close to two hundred pounds, he was being carried effortlessly with his feet dangling six inches from the floor. As the pair passed me, Mouldy's flat face broke into a huge smile and he waved his burden at me friendly.

"Hi, Sarge," he said. "Be with you soon as I dump this garbage."

The "Sarge" was a holdover from army days, when I had the misfortune of having Mouldy in my outfit.

I turned to watch as he approached the big double bronze doors and shouldered one side open without even setting the man down. Holding it open by leaning his back against it, he began swinging the man back and forth in a gradually increasing arc.

In time to the swinging he chanted, "One, two, three, the bumblebee—the rooster crows, and a-way she goes!"

At the last word he launched the man like a guided missile. I didn't see him come down, because Mouldy let the door swing shut. But since the entrance was elevated above the gravel drive out front by the height of a dozen stone steps, it couldn't have been a happy landing.

Returning with his face split by a wide grin, Mouldy raised a hand the size of a pancake griddle with the intention of giving me a friendly pat on the back. I nimbly side-stepped. It takes minutes to recover your breath after one of Mouldy's friendly pats.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

Mouldy shrugged. "Fausta said throw the bum out. He must of said something to her, I guess."

Mouldy had been like that in the army too. He always obeyed orders without question. His trouble was he interpreted them too literally. I suspected Fausta had meant for him merely to escort the man out.

We moved on to the bar together, the young couple at the table looking at Mouldy wide-eyed as we passed. The couple at the bar had turned to face us and were examining Mouldy with equally wide eyes. The man, tall, gray-haired and distinguished-looking, I recognized as Alderman Horace Jessup. The woman, a plump, middleaged brunette with a chin as strong as a man's, I assumed was his wife, since she wasn't lamourous enough to be a mistress.

Fausta, partially in and partially out of a green evening gown, stood at the end of the bar with her brown eyes flashing fire. As always, the sight of her vivid blonde hair and coffee-with-cream complexion made my heart do a flip. Fausta and I once planned to be married, before her fame as restaurateur made it evident that instead of her becoming Mrs. Moon, I would become Mr. Moreni. We never even talk about it any more, but I've never found anyone to replace her. As we approached, she said, "I hope he broke some bones." I was surprised. Apparently she had meant for Mouldy to throw the man out literally.

I said, "Who was he?"

"Hello, Manny," she said. "Just some jerk. Do you know Mr. and Mrs. Jessup?"

"I know the alderman," I said, offering my hand. "I haven't met his wife."

"How are you, Manny?" Horace Jessup said, clasping my

hand. "Helen, this is Manville Moon. I'm sure you've heard of him."

"Oh, yes," she said with a smile. "The private detective. How do you do, Mr. Moon?"

I said I did fine and that I was glad to know her. Then I turned back to Fausta.

"What was it all about, Fausta?"

"The man has been here before. He said he represents the Apex Protective Association and wanted me to buy his insurance against property damage. I told him no, I have all the insurance I need. Tonight he came back and told me if I did not buy his insurance, I would have the same kind of damage as Rico's Restaurant and Boyle's Cafe had last week. You know the places which were bombed? I realized then he was a racketeer wanting to—how do you say?—shake me down. So I told Mouldy to throw him out."

"Why, the bum!" Mouldy said. "You should've told me why, Fausta. I would've twisted a few arms and legs off before I gave him the heave."

I said with a frown, "You should have held him and called the cops, Fausta. Didn't you even find out his name?"

"Who cares about names?" she said with a shrug. "He is gone."

"Sure. And now if the joint is wrecked by a bomb, you won't have the faintest idea of where to tell the cops to start looking."

A little crease appeared between her lovely eyes. "I never thought of that, Manny."

Mouldy said, "Maybe he's still lying outside. I'll go ask him who he is."

"Never mind," I said. "He might not survive the question. I'll go look."

I walked to the front door and outside to the top of the steps. No one was lying in the driveway and no battered figure was staggering away into the night.

Returning to the bar, I said, "I guess he survived. Or maybe he went into orbit. Anyway, he's gone."

Horace Jessup said, "I was just telling Fausta that she



didn't handle this very intelligently. The police would have loved to get their hands on this man. They haven't been able to get anywhere with this restaurant extortion racket."

"Oh, they're aware of it, are they?" I asked.

"Of course. With two restaurants bombed in the past week, and a half dozen restaurant owners mysteriously beaten up? In the commissioner's last report to the Board of Aldermen, he said the police are stymied because the victims are too terrified to talk. They're sure someone is systematically preying on local restaurants, but they're powerless to do anything about it so long as the victims refuse to lodge complaints."

"I will lodge a complaint," Fausta volunteered.

"Against whom?" I inquired.

She pouted at me. "You would have done just the right thing, I know, Mr. Manny Moon. But you are used to dealing with gangsters. I cater to a better type than the low class you associate with."

I grinned at her. "I came in for a cocktail and dinner. Any chance of a table?"

"We haven't eaten yet," Horace Jessup said. "Why don't you join us?"

I accepted the invitation and Fausta placed us at a table near the dining room's side door. By the time we finished eating, it was past ten P.M. and ours was the only table still occupied. After dinner I invited the Jessups back to the cocktail lounge for a liqueur, but the alderman said he had to get up early next morning and they had better get home.

"I'll bring the car around to the side door to pick you up, dear," he said, rising to his feet. "It's been very nice seeing you again, Manny."

I told him it was nice to have seen him too, and that I'd enjoyed meeting his wife. It was a warm June night and neither one had worn coats, so they didn't have to go clear back out front to the cloakroom. As I headed for the bar, they moved toward the side door.

The young couple previously seated at a table in the cocktail lounge was now gone. Through the archway into the ballroom came the throbbing voice of a songstress, indicating that

the ten o'clock floor show was on. Presumably Fausta had drifted into the ballroom to watch it, for she wasn't in evidence either. The bar was deserted except for Al the barkeep and Mouldy Greene.

I was sipping a crème de menthe frappé and had just lighted a cigar when an explosion from the direction of the dining room rocked the building.

## II

Dropping my cigar, I ran to the dining room and skidded to a halt just inside the archway. Directly across from me was the side door. It didn't lead directly outside, but into a little anteroom about the size of a closet where there was an upholstered bench for ladies to sit on while waiting for their escorts to bring around the cars. Both the door from the dining room and the one on the opposite side of the anteroom leading outside were of plate glass. Or had been. Shards from the inner door had been spread all over the room.

As I skidded to a halt, the crash of two cars coming together sounded from outside.

Our waiter, the only one left on duty, was standing a few feet from the kitchen door with a tray full of dirty dishes from our table. He was frozen in position with his back turned and his head twisted over his shoulder, staring at the shattered door. I saw the kitchen door push open and a white-hatted chef peered out.

I could hear the excited voices of people who were pouring from the ballroom to investigate the explosion. In a moment they would be all over the dining room, I knew, milling around and destroying whatever evidence there was.

Over my shoulder I said to Mouldy, who had come to a halt just behind me, "Don't let anyone at all in here."

I knew I didn't have to elaborate. Now even Fausta wouldn't get past him. He wouldn't even let the police in until I rescinded the order.

As I started toward the side door, the waiter set down his tray and headed that way too.

He halted when I growled, "Just stand back and keep out of the way."

The anteroom was a shambles. In various places about the room were the remains of what had been a human being. By the torn fragments of blue satin lying here and there, I tentatively identified her as Helen Jessup, as that had been the color of the dress she wore. Otherwise it would have been difficult even to guess the sex.

There wasn't any glass in the outer door either, though by the broken pieces lying on the floor of the anteroom I could tell it hadn't been blown out, because that would have sent the pieces the other way. Obviously the bomb had smashed through the glass from outside before going off.

Taking care where I stepped, I crossed the anteroom and went outside.

All this sounds as though it took some time, but I had been moving faster than I tell it. My pause in the dining room had been momentary, just long enough for a quick glance around and my barked command to Mouldy. And I hadn't even broken stride when I threw my order to stay back at the waiter. I don't believe it was more than twenty seconds after the explosion before I stepped outside.

El Patio's parking lot is behind the building and the driveway goes right past the side door. A Cadillac was parked just back from the door with its motor running and its light on. Horace Jessup was in the act of getting out.

Up ahead, where the driveway curved past the front of the building, a blue Chevrolet sedan had crashed head-on into a taxicab. Apparently no one had been hurt, for the drivers of both vehicles were climbing from their cars. The lights of the Cadillac brightly illuminated the scene, and I could see both men clearly. The man climbing from the Chevrolet was the same one Mouldy had tossed out of the club an hour earlier.

He took off across country with the speed of a leaping gazelle.

El Patio is peculiarly located for a night club. At the extreme south edge of town, it is centered in a three-acre patch

of woods-covered ground. The reason for this is that originally it was an illegal gambling casino before Fausta took it over, and the first owner liked seclusion. So the dark man had a lot of ground to cover before he reached the road.

I made no attempt to chase him. Below the knee my right leg is an intricate contrivance of cork and aluminum, and while I am sufficiently adjusted to wearing a false leg so that it's no hindrance to normal activity, I'm not much of a runner. The extortionist, on the other hand, seemed out to break the Olympic record for the hundred-yard dash. I couldn't have run half the distance to the six-foot wall surrounding the grounds by the time he had scrambled over it and disappeared.

I turned to look at Horace Jessup. He was walking toward me unsteadily.

"It—it was that same man," he said huskily. "Helen—"

His voice trailed off and I took him by the elbow. "You won't want to see it, Horace. Let's go around and in the front way."

I led him past the side door, blocking the view with my body. As we reached the curve in the driveway where the two cars were tangled together, the taxi driver said excitedly "Hey, you two guys saw this, didn't you?"

"We have bigger problems on our minds," I said. "Come on inside."

I led Jessup on toward the front steps, holding his arm tightly to keep him from staggering. Apparently the taxi driver assumed from his wavering gait that he was hurt, for he followed along without saying anything.

Jessup asked no questions about his wife. The grayness of his face indicated he realized there was no point in asking.

The cocktail lounge was jammed with people who had crowded from the ballroom to see what was going on. There was a particular crush around the archway to the dining room, where Mouldy was holding the crowd at bay.

I summoned up my old army parade-ground voice to clear the room. "Everybody back to their tables!" I boomed. "On the double!"

In my prime as a first-sergeant I used to be able to rattle barracks windows a hundred yards from the parade ground. I guess I still had most of my form. Those nearest me nearly jumped out of their skins, and the excited chattering instantly died all over the room.

A couple meekly headed back to the ballroom. Another followed, the stream began to widen, then the entire mob was flowing, sheeplike, back through the archway into the ballroom. Within a minute only Fausta, Al the bartender and the three of us who had just come in from outside remained in the cocktail lounge. Mouldy still stood in the archway to the dining room.

I said to Fausta, "Get in there and ask no one to leave until the police arrive. If they have questions, just tell them there has been an accident, but there is no danger of further explosions."

"All right, Manny," she said in a small voice, heading toward the ballroom.

I led Jessup over to the bar and had him take a seat. "Give him a drink," I said to Al. "Better make it a double. Horace, stay right here, will you?"

He gave me a jerky nod.

The taxi driver had followed us over to the bar. He said, "What's the matter with him?"

"His wife was just murdered," I said. "Sit down somewhere and stay out of the way. We'll get to you eventually."

I went back into the dining room and crooked my finger at the waiter, who still stood where my order had halted him.

When he came over, I said, "Go out the front way and around to the side entrance. There's a Cadillac in the drive with its engine running and lights on. Shut both off. Then take up a position in front of the side door and keep everybody away from there."

"Yes, sir," he said, hastily moving off.

The chef still stood in the open kitchen doorway and two other members of the kitchen staff peered over his shoulder from behind.

I called, "Get back in the kitchen and stay there."

The chef stepped back and let the kitchen door close.

I went back out to the cocktail lounge. The taxi driver had seated himself at one of the tables against the wall. I used the bar phone to dial the home number of Inspector Warren Day.

For many years the chief of homicide and I have had a cooperative arrangement: he gets under my skin and I get under his. Nevertheless, in a competitive sort of way, we're pretty good friends.

You couldn't tell it by his response to my phone call, though. When I told him I had a murder for him, he bawled, "It's ten thirty at night, Moon. I go off duty at five. There's cops at headquarters who get paid for working the night trick."

"I thought this one merited the personal attention of the chief of homicide himself," I said. "Somebody just blew Horace Jessup's wife into a million pieces."

"Alderman Jessup?" he asked sharply.

"Uh-huh."

"My god!" he said. "He'll probably be the next mayor. Can't you find the bodies of less important people?"

"I didn't toss the bomb," I said reasonably.

"A bombing, huh? Where?"

"At El Patio. The bomber cracked up his car and took off on foot. If you get this area covered fast, you may net him. Got a pencil?"

"Yeah. Shoot."

"About five-eleven and a hundred and ninety to ninety-five. Dark complexion, dark straight hair, even features. He's dressed in a dark blue suit, white shirt, dark tie and black shoes. No hat. Age about forty."

"It'll be on the air in sixty seconds," he said. "Don't let a soul leave there. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

### III

The first police to arrive were a couple of radio car cops. Aside from phoning in the license number of the wrecked

Chevrolet, they didn't do much of anything. One man went outdoors to take over guard duty from the waiter I had posted on the side door, the other positioned himself in front of the ballroom door to make sure no patrons sneaked out before they were officially released.

It was ten to eleven when Warren Day made his appearance. It didn't surprise me that Lieutenant Hannegan, his constant satellite, was with him. When the inspector puts in overtime, he is not about to let a subordinate sleep. Hannegan always got routed away from home too when Day had to go out at night.

Marching the length of the cocktail lounge with the stocky lieutenant trailing a step behind, Day gazed fiercely over the top of his glasses at the taxi driver as he passed him. He threw equally fierce glances at Mouldy Green, still standing in the dining room archway, and at the uniformed cop posted before the ballroom archway across the room. The latter instinctively straightened his shoulders.

Fausta had come back from the ballroom and was seated on an end barstool. The inspector swept off his hat to her, exposing his skinny bald head, and gave her the green-persimmon grimace he thinks is a smile of greeting. After nodding to Horace Jessup, who still sat at the bar with an empty shot glass and a glass of water before him, he turned to me.

"Well, Moon?"

"This way, Inspector," I said, leading the way to the dining room.

I was a half dozen feet beyond Mouldy Green when the inspector's enraged voice said, "What do you think you're doing, you paleolithic moron?"

I turned to see that Mouldy was barring the way by pressing one huge hand against Warren Day's chest and the other against Hannegan's.

"They're all right, Mouldy," I said hastily.

Dropping his hands to his sides, Mouldy cheerfully gestured them on. But the inspector stood glaring at him, his thin nose beginning to whiten at the tip.

"My fault, Inspector," I said soothingly. "I told him to



keep everybody out of here, and forgot to rescind the order when the cops arrived."

Fortunately Day knew Mouldy almost as well as I did, and was aware of his strict adherence to orders. The white spot disappeared from the tip of his nose and he moved on with an irritated grunt.

After gazing into the anteroom for about ten seconds, the inspector turned away.

"A grenade, you figure?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "Some kind of bomb."

"The lab boys will put it back together. Let's have the details."

I told him everything I knew, starting with my arrival at the club just in time to see Mouldy eject the extortionist and ending with my call to him. Day strode back out to the cocktail lounge to question Fausta about the extortionist. Hannegan and I trailed after him.

Fausta said that the first time she had ever seen the dark man was the previous Friday afternoon, when he had come in and attempted to sell her some property-damage insurance. At the time it hadn't occurred to her that in reality he was demanding a protection payoff. She had merely taken him for an over-persistent salesman and had rather peremptorily dismissed him when he became insistent.

"I guess I was too dumb to understand his hints," she told Warren Day. "I should have known he was not just a salesman, because the first thing salesmen do is tell their names, and he did not even introduce himself. When he came back tonight, he stopped hinting. He told me right out if I did not buy his insurance, El Patio would have happen to it what happened to Rico's and Boyle's."

The inspector said, "He told you he represented the Apex Protective Association, did he? That's something, anyway. Up until now we haven't even been able to get anyone to tell us what this outfit called itself."

A three-man lab crew arrived at that moment. Day sent Hannegan to supervise its activities and turned to Horace Jessup.

"You ready to talk about this now, Mr. Jessup?"

The alderman looked at him from shock-glazed eyes. "What's there to talk about? She's dead."

"We want to find her killer," Day said, with what for him was extreme patience. "Just what happened out there?"

It was a moment before Jessup answered. Then he said firedly, "A car came down the driveway just as I was getting into mine on the lot. By the time I got the engine started, it had driven onto the lot and turned around. It drove right out again and stopped by the side door. I was just pulling off the lot when I heard a crash of glass, then the explosion. I don't think he got out of the car. He must have thrown it from the front seat. Immediately the car gunned forward, but it only got to the curve in the driveway when it smashed into a taxi coming around the curve. The man jumped out and ran."

Day said, "You recognized him as the same man Greene had thrown out earlier?"

Jessup nodded. "I'm positive. My headlights illuminated the scene clearly."

"That's right, Inspector," I put in. "I saw him too. There isn't the slightest doubt that it was the same man."

The bar phone rang and Al answered it.

"For you, Inspector," he called.

Day walked to the end of the bar and took the phone from Al's hand. After a few grunts, he hung up.

"D.M.V.," he growled. "That Chevy was reported stolen at six this evening."

He walked over to the taxi driver, who still sat at a side table. "What's your name?"

"Ogden Branch," the driver said. "It was the other guy's fault, mister. He came barreling up the drive like he was shot from a cannon. Those two guys at the bar saw it. Ask them."

"I don't care about your blasted collision," Day barked at him. "I'm investigating a murder. You know anything about that?"

The cab driver looked hurt. "I didn't even know there'd

been one. I come to pick up a fare and was driving back to the lot to turn around. What about my cab?"

"Phone your insurance agent," Day suggested caustically. "The other car was stolen, so you can't collect from the owner."

He started toward the dining room and the cab driver stood up.

Turning, the inspector barked, "I'm not through with you." Meekly the man sat down again.

I followed Day back into the dining room. Two of the lab men were in the anteroom, laboriously collecting something with tweezers. Hannegan was standing in front of the shattered door watching them.

"What are they doing?" Day inquired.

"Bomb fragments," Hannegan said briefly.

"Where's the third man?"

"Car," Hannegan said. "Prints."

"Anybody turn anything important yet?"

Hannegan shrugged, never being one to waste words when a gesture would serve.

"How long they think they'll be?"

Hannegan shrugged again.

"You ask them?"

The lieutenant shook his head.

"Can't you talk, blast it?" the inspector demanded.

Hannegan looked at him warily. "Yes, sir."

"Stay here until they finish, then bring me a report at headquarters," Day ordered. "Come with me, Moon."

I followed him back into the cocktail lounge again. He crooked his finger at the cop standing in the ballroom doorway. The man almost broke his neck getting over to him.

"Those people in there didn't see anything," Day said. "Tell them they can go home."

Then he said to me, "I want everyone who saw the bomber's face down at headquarters to look at pictures. That means you, Miss Moreni, Greene, Jessup and the cabbie. You can bring Greene and Miss Moreni in your car. I'll take the other two."

It was eleven-thirty when we got to headquarters. For an hour we all sat at a long table in the records room and looked at mug books. Cabbie Ogden Branch wasn't much help. Three times he thought he recognized the man who had wrecked his cab, and only once was there even the vaguest resemblance. The other two resembled the bomber about as much as Fausta resembled Mouldy Greene.

"Did you even see the man?" Warren Day finally demanded.

"Well, I was pretty excited, I guess," Branch admitted.

Day called over a cop and told him to drive Ogden Branch home. Meantime Day had been checking with the cops in the field by radio every so often to find out if the suspect had been netted. At twelve-thirty he came back from the communication room and announced that the search had been abandoned. We continued to flip the pages of mug books.

Horace Jessup suddenly announced, "Here he is!"

We all crowded around to look over his shoulder. There wasn't any doubt about it. In the center of the page were front and profile views of the man Mouldy had tossed from the club.

"That's the jerk," Mouldy confirmed.

Day looked at Fausta and me.

I said, "It's the man all right, Inspector," and Fausta gave a vigorous nod of agreement.

Day looked at the number below the picture, went over to the desk and called for the record card. When the clerk handed it to him, he came back to the table and read aloud from it.

"Jack Harrison Dill," he said. "Alias Ned Dill, Jack Diller, Jack Dillman. Age forty-one. Record goes back twenty-five years to grand theft, auto as a juvenile. Let's see." He started to count, moving one finger across the card. "Twenty-seven arrests, four convictions. Mostly petty theft and possession of stolen property. Two convictions for possession, two for grand theft, auto. Why, the guy's just a lousy car thief!"

"Maybe he was," I said. "But he's moved up in the world. Got a current address?"

Day said dubiously, "Three months old. When he was released from parole after his last fall. He won't be there. The first thing they do after a final report to a parole officer is move."

Hannegan walked into the record room at that moment. Day looked at him and the lieutenant shook his head.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the inspector bawled at him. "I can't understand your tribal signs."

Hannegan looked surprised. "No prints. Lab report tomorrow."

Day grunted. Handing the record card to Hannegan, he said, "Here's your man. Get out a local and an A.P.B. Then check the intelligence files to see if they have any dope on what mob he's running with."

He turned back to the rest of us. "All right, folks. Nothing more we can do tonight. Moon, you want to drive everybody back to El Patio?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll check back with you tomorrow."

"I thought you probably would," he said sourly.

#### IV

Just before noon the next day I walked into Warren Day's office. He lifted his skinny bald head from the open file folder he was studying and scowled at me over his glasses. As I seated myself in front of his desk, he moved his cigar humidor back out of my reach.

"I brought my own today," I said, taking two cigars from my pocket and offering him one.

He sniffed at it before putting it in his pocket, then searched his ashtray until he found a half-consumed butt. Popping it into his mouth, he chewed on it without lighting it. Setting fire to my own cigar, I leaned back comfortably.

"Any developments?" I asked.

"Lots," he said. "You want them in order of importance, starting with the least important and working up?"

"That would be nice."

He shifted the cigar to the other side of his mouth and

talked around it. "The lab boys recovered enough bomb fragments to identify it as a World War II type army grenade. Same kind as used in the bombings of Rico's and Boyle's."

"Isn't that important?" I asked.

"Not as much as other developments. There's no business firm registered as the Apex Protective Association. We hoped they had tried to make their extortion racket semi-legal by actually selling some kind of insurance policy, but I guess it's just a plain oldfashioned shakedown operation."

"That doesn't seem very important," I said.

"Sure it is. When we nail them, they can't wriggle out of an extortion rap by having some smart lawyer prove they offered a legal service for the money they collected."

"All right," I conceded. "I'm no judge of what's important and what isn't. What else?"

"Intelligence has nothing on Jack Dill running with any known mob. So we still don't know who's behind this racket."

I decided not to express my opinion of the relative importance of this item. "Is that all?"

"Nope. Jack Dill's body was fished out of the river at nine this morning with three bullet holes in it. The M.E. places time of death at between two and three A.M."

I took the cigar out of my mouth and stared at him. "How do you figure that?"

"Simple," Day said. "Up to now this outfit has been careful not to kill anybody. Both the other bombings were after hours, when the restaurants were deserted. Dill goofed and the boys didn't like it."

After thinking this over, I nodded. "That makes sense. Anything else?"

"What do you expect for a nickel cigar?" he inquired.

"It cost fifteen cents," I said, rising. "I guess the next step is to find out who's behind the Apex Protective Association."

"Oh, that should be easy," the inspector said sarcastically. "How do you suggest we find out?"

I grinned at him. "If I passed all my techniques on to the cops, my clients would start coming here instead of paying me fees. I'll know in an hour."

"Then I'll expect to hear from you in an hour," he bawled after me as I walked out the door.

Rico's Restaurant was an Italian food place on Pine. There were two rooms of equal size, but the dining room was all boarded up, still undergoing repairs from the bomb damage of the previous week. Food was still being served in the bar-room, though. The booths and the bar itself were packed with people having lunch and a number were standing waiting for seats.

Round little Rico Casale, the proprietor, spotted me as I walked in the door and bounced over with his hand out.

"Manny, *amico!*"

"Hi, Rico," I said, shaking his hand. "Looks like you're too crowded here to handle an extra customer."

"A customer, yes; a guest, no. I am just going to lunch. You eat with me in the kitchen."

He dragged me back through the swinging door into the kitchen. There was an oilcloth-covered table off to one side, out of the way of the kitchen help. Rico gestured to a chair, seated himself opposite me and shouted a few orders. Within two minutes we had spaghetti, salad and Chianti wine before us.

"I guess it's better to be a guest than a customer," I said, "no wait."

"Don't talk," Rico ordered, "eat."

I waited until we had finished eating and were having a couple of my cigars over coffee before I brought up the reason I had come here for lunch.

Then I said, "You heard about the bombing at El Patio last night, I suppose."

The expansive smile on his face faded. "It was in this morning's paper."

"Probably the same people who tossed a bomb here, I imagine."

"Who knows?" he shrugged. "Our bombing is still a mystery."

"Just to the cops," I said. "Not to you, Rico."

He frowned at me.



"You don't want to go on paying protection the rest of your life, do you, Rico? Wouldn't you like to get off the hook?"

His face became utterly blank. "I pay no protection, Manny."

I smiled at him. "Aren't we *compari*, Rico?"

"I thought we were. I didn't think you would try to cause me trouble."

"I wouldn't," I assured him. "I just want to bust up this extortion racket. I'm not a cop. I won't haul you on the stand to testify. All I want is information for my own private use."

After contemplating me for a moment, he asked, "What's your interest?"

"Fausta," I said briefly.

His face relaxed enough to show a slight smile. "Of course. They were not very smart to pick on El Patio. They should have known it would bring you on their necks."

"Who's running this racket, Rico?"

After a moment of silence, he said, "You promise I will not be involved?"

I raised my right hand. "I won't tell a soul where I got the information."

"They might guess," he said worriedly. "Everybody knows we are *compari*."

"Half the restaurant owners in town are friends of mine," I said. "Stop worrying."

He gave in. "All right, Manny. The man who collects from me is named Art Colton. You know him?"

"Yeah," I said with surprise. "He's one of Lonnie Baltimore's boys. Is Lonnie behind this?"

"I don't know. My only contact is Colton. He gives no information. He just collects."

"Lonnie must be behind it," I said. "Art Colton hasn't enough brains to organize anything himself. He's just muscle."

Rising to my feet, I dropped a couple of bills on the table. Rico frowned at them.

"Don't get insulted," I said. "I'm not offering to pay for the meal. That's a tip for the kitchen help."

I left the restaurant and went to look up Lonnie Baltimore.

Lonnie Baltimore had been a thorn in the side of the local police for many years. At one time or another he had been involved in every racket from bookmaking to narcotics. But up till now I had never heard of him going in for extortion. The last I knew, he had been king-pin of the local policy wheel, but I did recall hearing a rumor that an out-of-town mob was moving in on that. Perhaps he had been pushed out, and in desperate search of another racket, had turned to extortion.

Lonnie ran a joint on the east side with the respectable sounding name of the Baltimore Club. But nothing about it but the name was respectable. It was a big, barnlike place with dirty walls, which featured strip acts and employed waitresses who didn't mind being fondled by the patrons and with whom you could arrange after-closing dates for a small fee.

The Baltimore Club didn't draw much daytime custom. Aside from the bartender, the only person in the place was a man seated at the bar.

If there had been any doubt in my mind that Lonnie Baltimore was behind the extortion racket, the sight of the lone customer dispelled it. He was Art Colton.

## V

Art Colton was a huge, slab-shouldered man with ring-warped ears and a ridge of scar tissue above his eyes. I had put some of the scar tissue there in a preliminary fight at the Civic Auditorium some years back when I was still having dreams of becoming heavyweight champ. Shortly afterward I had developed sense enough to get out of the fight game while my brains were still unscrambled and I still had most of what I laughingly refer to as my looks. Colton had gone on as a preliminary fighter until both were pretty well scrambled. He wasn't exactly punchy, but he jumped whenever a telephone rang.

He swung around to look at me when I opened the door and his hand instinctively moved to his coat opening. I shook my head at him chidingly.

I said, "You'd still be fumbling for it while I stitched your shirt to your skin with bullets, Art. Don't make me do it. I'm kind of in the mood to kick what's left of your brains out, but I'd hate to have to shoot you."

I halted two feet from his barstool. After examining me warily, he dropped his hand to his lap. The bartender, a tall, skinny man who was a stranger to me, started to reach under the bar.

"You'll look awfully silly with that cut-down pool cue jammed down your throat," I said without looking at him.

He hesitated, then put his back against the back-bar and decided to let Colton handle me.

"Let's go see Lonnie," I said to Colton. "Up off your stool and lead the way."

It took him a while to move, because first he had to decide whether to obey, take a swing at me or make a try for his gun. I waited patiently. You had to allow time when Art Colton was thinking. Eventually he seemed to decide his boss was more qualified to make whatever decision was necessary about me, for he finally got up from his stool and lumbered toward the draped archway at the rear of the place.

Beyond the drapes there was a hallway with a couple of rooms off of it where poker and crap games were sometimes held. At the end of the hall was an office door. Colton tapped on the door.

When a voice from inside said, "Yeah?" he pushed open the door and went in. I crowded in close behind him.

Lonnie Baltimore was nearly as big as Art Colton, but not so much of him was muscle. There were two chins beneath his moonlike face and a balloon of fat above his belt. An open ledger lay on the desk and Baltimore, in shirt sleeves, was standing before a file cabinet in a corner of the room.

When he saw who had entered on Colton's heels, the fat man turned a trifle pale. Pushing shut the file drawer he had been searching, he gazed at me silently.

I said, "Art had the urge to reach for his gun when I walked in, Lonnie. Now you turn pale. It makes me suspect you both know why I'm here."

Baltimore licked his lips. "You suspect wrong. I don't know."

"What made you think you could pass at Fausta without getting your head knocked off?" I asked curiously.

"Listen, Moon—"

"You have a weak memory as well as a weak mind," I interrupted. "Mugs don't call me Moon."

He licked his lips again. "Okay. Mr. Moon. I saw in the paper what happened. If you think I had anything to do with that, you're crazy."

"Then why are both you and your punchy friend here so skittish? You were both ready to run before I even accused you of anything."

"I wasn't ready to run," Colton said with an odd mixture of belligerence and uncertainty. "I ain't afraid of you."

"I know, Art. You're real tough. Just recently you've beaten the hell out of a half dozen undersized restaurant owners. In a minute you'll have an opportunity to show how tough you are against somebody who knows how to hit back. But first I have business with your boss."

I turned back to Baltimore and Art Colton surprised me. The moment I took my eyes off him, he threw a left jab at my head. It connected without doing any damage, but the following right hook would have torn my head off if it had landed where he meant it to. Instead it landed on my raised left forearm.

Even in his prime ring days Colton had never been fast, and he had slowed considerably since then. When I planted a solid right in his solar plexus, he obligingly dropped his hands to leave his head an unobstructed target. I don't think he saw either the right or left I threw against his jaw. He trod heavily backward on his heels until the wall stopped him, slid down the wall to a seated position and rolled over on his side.

Lonnie Baltimore had jumped behind his desk and was jerking open the top drawer. I stepped behind it too and used my aluminum foot to kick the drawer closed just as his hand darted into it.

Letting out a howl of pain, he pulled it back open and jerked out his bruised hand. He moved it rapidly up and down in the same motion you would use to shake water from your hand, probably as an indication of pain. I chose to misinterpret it as another pass at me so that I could justify it as self-defense when I sank my fist squarely between his two chins.

After a while they both woke up. By then I had removed a forty-five automatic from beneath Art Colton's arm and a thirty-eight revolver from the top desk drawer. I put one in each side pocket of my coat.

Colton came around first. I helped him to his feet, sat him in a chair against the wall and told him to stay there. When Baltimore decided to rejoin us, I let him raise himself into the swivel chair behind the desk all by himself. He gazed at me blearily.

I said, "To get back to what I was going to say, Lonnie, why did you pick on Fausta? You must have known I'd be around the next day."

He said thickly, "Honest to God, I don't know a thing about that. Jack Dill wasn't one of my boys."

"Come off it, Lonnie. You're not going to insult my intelligence by denying you're behind this extortion racket, are you? I wouldn't be here unless I knew."

He was beginning to recover from the blow on the chops. He said in a sullen but less thick voice, "Who talked?"

"So that you can have one of your goons lean on him?" I asked. "Don't strain my patience, Lonnie. You want a bat on one of your other chins?"

"You've got this all wrong, Moo—Mr. Moon. That must of been some other outfit trying to horn in on the racket. I was steering clear of El Patio."

I contemplated him with a frown. "You're not the Apex Protective Association?"

He started to shake his head, changed his mind because the motion didn't seem to agree with him. "Never heard of it. I got a legal operation. Consolidated Coverage, Incorporated. You look at one of our contracts. We protect against bur-

glaries, fake damage suits and property damage. Nobody can prove nothing on us, because we sell a service."

My frown deepened. "You're a registered corporation?"

"Sure we are. I just told you it's all legal."

I reached across the desk for his phone and he turned pale, misinterpreting my movement.

"Relax," I growled. "I probably won't clobber you any more unless you talk back to me."

I dialed headquarters and asked for Warren Day.

"This is Manny Moon," I said when he got on the phone.

"Want to send a couple of cops over to the Baltimore Club?"

"What pleasant surprise do you have for me this time?" he asked sourly. "Somebody like the governor laid out?"

"These are still alive, Inspector. Lonnie Baltimore and Art Colton. I thought you'd like to talk to them about the recent wave of extortions."

"Lonnie's behind the Apex Protective Association?" he asked in a voice which almost sounded pleased. "If he is, I'll want to talk about a little more than extortion. The charge is murder."

"Lonnie denies any connection with last night," I said. "He claims he never heard of Apex and runs a clean little corporation called Consolidated Coverage. You can be checking that while your minions are collecting the suspects. I don't know how much good it's going to do to pull them in, but I'm tired of talking to them and thought I'd give you a turn."

"What do you mean, you don't know how much good it will do? Is Lonnie behind this racket or not?"

"Oh, he's behind it all right. But you have to get a complaint to prove extortion, and you haven't had much luck getting victims to talk so far."

Day growled, "You must have some proof, Moon, or you wouldn't be sending them in."

"I don't have anything that will stand up in court. Maybe you'll be able to get some of the victims to talk, now that you know who's been leaning on them. If you can't, and have to let Lonnie go, at least you'll have the satisfaction of knowing he's out of business."

"Why will he be, if we can't convict him?"

"I plan to form the Moon Protective Association," I said, throwing a pleasant smile at Baltimore. "The members will be all Lonnie's extortion victims. For a small fee I'll guarantee to keep him off their backs. You probably won't approve of my methods, because they'll be the same nasty ones Lonnie's been using."

"You're as bad as Baltimore," the inspector bawled at me. "You'll beat him up every hour on the hour until he stops bothering your clients. You can't operate like that."

"Watch me," I said, and hung up.

The inspector must have sent the nearest radio car, because two uniformed cops showed up in five minutes. I gave them the two guns and explained which belonged to Baltimore and which to Art Colton.

"If the inspector can't make an extortion rap stick, maybe he can at least get them on carrying," I suggested.

The cops carted them off in handcuffs.

## VI

No one was at home at the big house on Hanley Place where Horace Jessup lived. I tried the city hall, but no one had seen the alderman there.

City alderman wasn't a full time job and Jessup was also an insurance broker. I checked the phone book for his business address and found that his office was in the Bland Building in suite 307.

At the Bland Building I took an elevator to the third floor and walked down a thickly carpeted hall to suite 307. Gold lettering on the door said: H. JESSUP—INSURANCE.

Opening the door, I stepped into a well furnished waiting room at the far end of which was another door marked: PRIVATE. There was some leather-upholstered furniture and several chrome and enamel cigarette stands. There was also a modernistic desk with a golden redhead behind it who was so stunning she made me blink.

The girl was probably about twenty-five. I could only see



her from the waist up, but that part of her was strictly Playboy Magazine. She wore a green sweater designed for about a thirty-two-inch bust, and hers must have measured thirty-eight. The fabric was stretched so tautly across her mammary glands, I had the uneasy impression they would burst like balloons at any moment. That would have been a shame, for they were about the cutest set of mammae I had ever seen outside of a burlesque theater.

When I was able to wrench my gaze upward, I saw that she had a face as lovely as her body. Her golden hair hung long, nearly to her shoulders, then turned sleekly under in page boy style. Milk-white skin so smooth it gave the impression of translucence deepened the green of her eyes and brightened the red of full, perfectly shaped lips. I suppose the smile she threw me was intended merely as one of impersonal greeting, but it came out so dazzling, it had much the same effect as an exploding flash bulb.

"Yes, sir?" she inquired in a melodious voice.

"You constitute unfair sales tactics," I said. "By the time clients get to your boss, they must be so stunned, they'll sign anything."

Her smile became amused. "Then it's wasted effort so far as you're concerned. Mr. Jessup isn't in."

"Good. I'll wait and look at you." I took one of the leather-upholstered chairs and gazed at her admiringly.

"He won't be in at all today. His wife was killed last night."

"I know," I said. "I was there. I'm Manville Moon."

Finely arched eyebrows raised. "Oh, the private detective."

"You've heard of me?" I asked, pleased.

"Not until today. When Mr. Jessup phoned this morning, he mentioned that he and Mrs. Jessup had dined with you just before the tragedy."

"Oh well," I said philosophically. "I never heard of you either. What's your name?"

"Miss Taylor."

"How do you do, Miss Taylor? May I call you Miss for short?"

She smiled again, partially stunning me. "You may call me Jessica if you wish, Mr. Moon."

"Make it Manny," I said. "I want us to become close friends. Do you know where Jessup is?"

"I imagine at home."

I shook my head. "I tried there. Also the city hall."

"He may be making funeral arrangements. He said the funeral would be from Strong and Larson Mortuary. Would you like me to check?"

"If you would."

There was a phone on her desk, but the phone book lay on top of a filing cabinet behind the desk. When she rose and turned her back to look up the number, I saw that she was as perfect from the waist down as she was above it. Her legs were long and shapely and her rounded little bottom was as cute as her rounded upper torso.

She sat again, dialed a number and asked if Horace Jessup had been there. After listening for a moment, she said, "Thank you," and hung up.

"He made arrangements by phone," she said. "The only place I can think of he may be is the armory."

"What armory?"

"The National Guard. Hor—Mr. Jessup is very active in the National Guard. He's regimental commander."

"Well, well," I said. "That explains one thing that's been puzzling me."

"What's that?" she asked.

"The means."

She frowned, and her frown was nearly as pretty as her smile. "The means for what?"

"In every crime there must be means, motive and opportunity," I explained. "Before I came in here, all I had figured out was the last. The instant I saw you, I recognized the motive, and now I know the means. You've been very helpful."

"I have?" she asked, arching her eyebrows again. "I'm sorry I can't say the same for you. I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"I'll try to make it clear, Jessica. How long have you been with Horace?"

"About six months."

"Do you have a social as well as a business relationship?"

She frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'd like to be tactful," I said. "But I don't know how. I take it for granted he's in love with you. I'm beginning to flip myself, and he's known you six months longer than I have. Have you given him any encouragement?"

"What an awful thing to say!"

"I'm a cad," I admitted. "But you do make a lovely motive. If you were around me every day for six months and I had a wife, which I haven't in case you want to make a mental note of my availability for future reference, I might murder her too."

She stared at me.

"He did kill her," I said. "Of course it's possible he did it for some other reason than to make himself free for you, but I doubt it."

"Are you serious?" she inquired on a high note.

"Totally."

"But—but some gangster threw the bomb. It was in the paper."

"That was no gangster," I said. "That was just a small-time car thief your boss hired to play a part. And he didn't toss the bomb. Horace did."

Her lovely lips parted slightly. "You must be insane."

"I've been accused of being a little nuts," I admitted. "But I'm thinking straight on this subject. Horace decided to get rid of his wife and the recent restaurant bombings gave him a bright idea. To set the scene he hired Jack Dill to play the part of an extortionist. Dill wasn't very bright. He did such a poor acting job on his first visit that Fausta Moreni, El Patio's owner, brushed him off as an insurance salesman. I imagine we'll find that Jessup and his wife were dining at El Patio that night too, but Horace postponed plans when he realized his stooge had failed to get across the intended message. Presumably he rehearsed Dill until he was more

convincing in the part and tried again last night." I paused to chuckle as something struck me funny.

"What's so amusing?" she asked with bewilderment.

"This time Dill did such a good job, he got himself tossed out literally. It must have been more than he bargained for when he found himself flying through the air to make a painful landing on a gravel drive. But he wasn't hurt enough to be unable to go through with the rest of his instructions. He limped back to the parking lot and waited in the car he had stolen earlier that evening. This is only surmise, of course, but I assume Horace had instructed him to wait there until he came after his own car, then precede him off the lot and halt at the side door. Horace halted behind him, climbed out to toss the bomb and immediately jumped back in his car."

Her green eyes had become enormous. "How can you know that? If Horace did plan things as you say, why wouldn't he have hired this Dill man to throw the bomb?"

"Dill was no hired killer. He probably didn't know murder was intended. I don't know what bill of goods Horace sold him to get him to follow instructions, but I'll bet he convinced him they were merely playing some kind of practical joke. Jack Dill was so flabbergasted when the bomb went off, he panicked and rammed head-on into a taxi. That must have given Horace a hard moment, because it wasn't in his plans to have Dill apprehended. But fortunately, for Horace's plan, Dill managed to escape on foot. Later that night, when Horace met Dill to make the payoff for his services, he paid with bullets instead of cash."

"How horrible!" the redhead breathed. "I never for a moment thought—"

When her voice trailed off, I said, "Thought what? That his little attentions meant he was really serious about you?"

Then I noticed that her gaze was fixed beyond me and that her pause was the result of something she had seen there. I twisted my head around just in time to see Horace Jessup quietly close the door to the hall and lean against it. He had an army forty-five automatic in his hand.

"That from the armory too?" I asked. "Like the grenade?"

"It's the standard sidearm for field grade officers," he said quietly. "I've had the door cracked open for some time, Manny."

"Then we won't have to go over it all again," I said. "Did I hit it pretty close?"

"On the nose, except for how I managed to get in contact with a man such as Jack Dill. You couldn't have known that. I caught him in the act of stealing my car about a month ago, and made a deal with him in lieu of having him arrested."

"Horace!" Jessica said. "Then it's all true!"

"I told you I was going to make myself free," he said in the same quiet voice. "You can't say you didn't encourage me."

"It was just a joke!" she said. "I thought you were just teasing me. Why—why you're old enough to be my father!"

Horace Jessup's face gradually turned gray. He forgot me completely as his gaze fixed on his secretary.

I suddenly sensed that, in his despair, he was on the verge of shooting her. It may have been a misapprehension, but I didn't wait to find out. Slipping from the chair to one knee and twisting to face him at the same time, I swept out my P-38 and fired. I wouldn't have had a chance if he hadn't forgotten my presence, but his attention was so riveted on the woman he had uselessly committed murder to attain, he didn't even notice my movement.

My slug caught him just where I aimed it: high in the right bicep. He slammed back against the door and dropped his gun. An instant later I had scooped it up and was leading him over to a chair.

"It was supposed to be a joke!" Jessica said hysterically. "What would I want with an old man like you?"

As Jessup collapsed heavily into the chair, gripping the hole in his bicep, I said, "Don't rub it in, Jessica. Obviously he has no sense of humor."

# Baby Sister

(A Chester Drum story)

by

Stephen Marlowe

†

SHE WAS WEARING one of those no-back bathing suits that have finally managed to chase the bikini off the French Riviera. Prone on the hot sand the way she was, with her back a tawny tanned color, and the whole glorious length of her stretched out indolently, she looked nude from the waist up. She wasn't. Those no-back suits have collarbone hugging necklines—not that I could see her collarbones at the moment.

"And yesterday?" she asked me, raising her head. She was sweating in the heat and the sun, and there was sand on her chin. Her long hair was almost exactly the same color as her suntan, but with golden glints in it. Her green eyes were staring at my bare feet. A couple of inches from her outstretched left hand on the sand was a pack of Gauloise cigarettes. I nudged it toward her hand with my big toe, squatted in front of her, lit the cigarette that she had lazily placed between her lips, and said:

"Yesterday your little sister bought a couple of simple little rocks at a couturier named Madame Florissant, right here in Cannes a block off the Croisette. They weighed in at a thousand new francs each, and she took them as is, without alterations. That was the afternoon. In the evening—"

"A thousand new francs each, *mon dieu*," said Caroline Thevenin. A thousand new francs is two hundred bucks American folding money.

"In the evening," I went on with my report, "she picked up an American sailor named Huggins in a café on the Croisette. They ate at the Carlton and took a cab to the casino, not the municipal one on the waterfront but the private joint up the road toward Nice."

"She won? She won for a change?" Caroline Thevenin asked hopefully.

"Huggins won a couple of hundred at what you French call 'le craps.' Your little sister Gaby dropped a bundle. She was looped on Cordon Rouge champagne, but not so looped they wouldn't take her dough. She lost at *chemin de fer*, lost more at *vingt-et-un*, and really did a swell job at roulette."

"How much?" Caroline asked, sitting up and brushing sand off the sleek black front of her bathing suit.

"Four thousand."

"Francs? New francs?"

I shook my head. "Dollars."

"*Mon dieu*," Caroline said again.

"Then Huggins took her to her suite at the Carlton and hopped the launch back to his ship. It's a cruiser," I added irrelevantly. "Rocket-launching variety."

"At least he did not spend the night," Caroline said. "Perhaps I should be happy for small favors."

But I had to scotch that too. "They have a date for tonight. Huggins has a gleam in his eye."

A shadow came between me and the sun. I looked up and saw Raoul Duplesis. "Stop her," he told Caroline in French. "Stop her, or at this rate she will go through all your savings in a month."

"It's been quite a shock to Gabrielle," Caroline said, defending her younger sister. "She will come to her senses."

"Yes?" said Raoul with a sarcastic smile. "Tell me when."

"Raoul, it is my money." Raoul was putting his foot in it, but either didn't want to or hadn't read the signs. Caroline Thevenin's green eyes had gone hard, and the throaty purr of her voice was a danger signal.

But Raoul persisted. "Not only does she spend your money like *vin ordinaire*, but you pay M. Drum five hundred nouveau francs a day to watch her do it. This must stop. I, Raoul Duplesis, tell you so."

"You, Raoul Duplesis," said Caroline sweetly, "are a parasite."

Duplesis grinned down at her arrogantly, his white teeth



flashing against his bronzed skin. He was a muscular specimen about my height, which is six-one, and my weight, which is one-eighty-five. Our lines of work, though, differed. I am a private eye, international variety. Raoul Duplesis is a pimp.

"I am an artist," Duplesis said, still grinning down at her. He laughed. "Perhaps you might say, a ghost artist."

Duplesis was a third-rate surrealist dabbler who had done a lazy canvas a month the last couple of years. Caroline Thevenin had signed her name to all of them. None sold; none was good enough. Every now and then she'd get rid of a batch by burning them, claiming, when her kid sister Gaby came down to the Riviera for a visit from the finishing school in Montreux where she was stashed, that they had sold.

For a couple of years this had kept Gaby, full name Gabrielle Thevenin, happy. Big sister was a talented artist keeping her in school by painting up a storm. But then one night a couple of weeks ago she had walked in on Caroline while big sister was plying her trade.

Caroline was the most expensive beeznis-girl on the French Riviera. A beeznis-girl is a whore.

She charged five hundred francs a night, lived frugally, except for what she paid Duplesis, and had salted away a pile in the Credit Lyonnais branch bank here in Cannes. Wisely, in case anything happened to her, it was a joint account in her name and her sister's. But learning Caroline was a high-class whore instead of an artist had come as a shock to Gaby. She had reacted with a grim and compulsive determination to spend all her sister's hard-earned dough in a hurry. She had cleaned out the account, opened a new one in her name only and was having herself a ball as only a ball could be had on the French Riviera. My job was to see that she didn't get hurt in the process.

"It is time you went to the police," Duplesis said. "The little thief will make us both paupers, *chérie*."

But Caroline Thevenin and I had been all through that. If she went to the cops about the dough, and if there was a

stink, that would be the end of the finishing school in Montreux.

Caroline got mad, and when Caroline got mad it really was something to see. She sprang up from the sand, all fifteen and thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six of her, placed her hands on her hour-glass hips, stood about two inches from Duplesis all the way from their jaws to their bare toes, and bawled at him like a fishwife.

"Yes? You dare to call my little sister a thief? And what are you? A pimp when I found you, and that is what you will be again, because of what use are your paintings to me now?" That much I could understand, and then the French got too fast and furious for me, and too tough for Duplesis to take, because it ended with him stepping back and hitting Caroline in the face open-palmed, deftly and contemptuously, once forehand and once backhand, before I could get between them, grab Duplesis' wrist, lever his arm behind his back in a hammerlock and shove him stumbling across the sand.

Naturally, all that brought a crowd, the men looking speculatively at Caroline, the women angrily at Duplesis and curiously at me. Duplesis had had enough, at least for now. He slunk away like an old Mack Sennett villain, heading for the beach-café of the Martinez Hotel.

"He could be right," I told Caroline gently. "If she keeps it up, the kid's liable to break you."

Unexpectedly there were tears, but not of anger, in the big green Thevenin eyes. "Let her get it out of her system. She will. I know it. She is all I have."

I was having a Pernod with Senator Hartsell at the sidewalk café outside the Hotel Carlton. It was almost dusk but still hot, and a heat haze half-obscured the high peaks of the Alps Maritime beyond the curve of the bay. Looking beyond the heavy traffic moving sluggishly along the Croisette, I could see a launch leading its white wake toward shore from the big cruiser anchored a mile or so out on the water. If Huggins were aboard, and I thought he would be, I was about to start earning my daily wage.

"Kind of messed up your vacation, didn't I, Chet?" the Senator chuckled. I had done some investigatory work for the Hartsell Committee in Bonn and Paris and, afterwards, opted for a week in the sun. Senator Hartsell had suggested Cannes.

"I never miss an opportunity to get rejuvenated by Caroline Thevenin when I'm on this side of the big pond," he had said in Paris. "That girl is incredible. There ought to be more like her—she keeps an old coot like me young."

Senator Hartsell had spent just one night at his rejuvenation cure. The next morning he'd looked like a pallbearer at his best friend's funeral. "Double dang it all to hell and back," he'd told me, "Caroline's heart just ain't in it." Then he had dumped Caroline's story in my lap. "Damned if I know what to do. Do you?"

"What does the lady want done?" I had asked, going for the bait.

Senator Hartsell had smiled his cagiest political smile. "Well now, son," he had suggested, setting the hook, "why don't you kind of ask her?"

Caroline Thevenin's green eyes and sultry voice had further hooked me, which is how and why I'd become her profligate kid sister's bodyguard. So far the body, which could compete with Caroline's though on a different scale, had needed no guarding.

"Here comes Huggins," I said at the café outside the Carlton. A red-haired, freckle-faced kid in a white sailor suit was approaching our table. He passed it striding jauntily on his way to the Carlton entrance.

"*Rien ne va plus,*" intoned the croupier in a bored voice as, with a flick of the wrist, he sent the little ivory ball spinning on its way.

I stood about six feet from Gaby Thevenin at the big betting table. She had been playing eight and eleven steadily and stubbornly, a hundred new francs on each at a clip. She was watching, without any real interest, as the roulette wheel

slowed down and the ball, whirling in the opposite direction, bounced into a slot.

"*Vingt et rouge*," said the croupier disdainfully, as his sidekick raked in the chips. Gaby watched him as if he were a man raking leaves. She had dined with Huggins at a de luxe joint on the Croisette with, if anything, less enthusiasm. It was his money they spent at the restaurant, not her sister's.

"How much you drop?" Huggins asked in a loud whisper. He had a balloon glass of cognac in his hand, and he'd made the short trip to the casino bar several times before. He was more than a smidgen drunk and beginning to show it.

"I do not know," Gaby said. "Ten thousand new francs. Or perhaps twelve."

Huggins whistled. "Jesus, where'd you get it?"

They were speaking English, Huggins with the flat accents of Kansas, and Gaby as if she were translating French literally, word for word. She had very black hair and gray eyes and was wearing a white, low-cut off-the-shoulder gown that showed the smooth creamy curves of her throat and shoulders and thrust her breasts up and out pneumatically for inspection. I was not beyond inspecting her somewhat lecherously. She was really something.

"My sister is a famous artist," she said, answering Huggins' question. "You have heard of her? Caroline Thevenin?" She laughed, not quite bitterly.

"No," said Huggins.

"Permit me," said an old codger in a white dinner jacket standing on the other side of Gaby. She had been matching Huggins drink for drink, but seemed to be holding it better than the sailor was. She turned on the old guy slowly.

"Yes?"

"Did you say Caroline Thevenin?"

"Yes, I said Caroline Thevenin."

"And that she is an artist?"

"But yes," said Gaby sweetly.

The old guy laughed a couple of asthmatic wheezes. "Well, my dear," he said, "you of course have your name for it and I have mine."

Gaby turned back to Huggins. "With your permission," she said, still sweetly, plucking the balloon glass of cognac daintily out of his hand the way you pluck a flower off a stem. Then she hurled its contents in the old guy's face.

A pair of casino guards dressed like the customers in dinner jackets began to close in, but the old guy didn't make a fuss. He shrugged a very French shrug, wiped his face with a monogrammed silk handkerchief and bet on three numbers and black.

"*Rien ne va plus*," said the croupier.

Huggins looked very pale under his freckles. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said.

Gaby shoved the rest of her chips out on the table. "*Pour le personnel*," she said, and the chips disappeared down the trap.

After that, Huggins and his date went pub-crawling.

They wound up, at three a.m., in a dingy dive on a cobbled road that leads up past Super Cannes to the three Corniches. Their taxi driver, a beefy man with a heavy beard-shadow on his sullen face, was having a *demi* and playing dominoes at a corner table with the patron. They seemed to know each other, which should have set the alarm bells jangling inside my head. But by three a.m. it was a tired old head and I told myself, okay, so he suggested this dive for a nightcap and maybe the patron will give him a slice of the take. No reason to call out the Sûreté over it.

My own taxi driver was waiting outside. I'd shared his vigil in the dark and empty back streets of Cannes outside half a dozen other dubious bistros, but this time I'd decided to join the party—if discreetly at a table of my own. Huggins had had a lot to drink and looked ready to pass out. Gaby, still matching him drink for drink, looked as fresh as the orange blossoms they cultivate for perfume in the hills above Cannes.

Gaby said something I didn't hear. Huggins said, in sad and well-lubricated disbelief: "You mean you're really not going to bed with me?"

The girl patted his hand, smiled and shook her head. "I am sleepy and would like you to take me back to the hotel." She added unnecessarily: "Where I will sleep—alone."

But first she headed for the W.C. Huggins watched her pretty butt, tight in the white dress, wag off in that direction. Then he sighed, told the patron, "We'll have one for the road, I guess," lurched to his feet and went to the can himself.

Instead of filling their glasses at the table, the patron brought them behind the zinc bar and took a long time sloshing bad brandy into them. While this was going on, the taxi driver hunched his shoulders at one end of the bar and spoke softly and quickly into the telephone there.

The patron returned the glasses to the table. The taxi driver stuck a cigarette on his lower lip, lit it and waited. Gaby returned from the W.C. first. Nobody looked at her, though they were Frenchmen and she was well worth looking at.

I was wondering what they would have done after Gaby and Huggins drank their mickeys when the sailor returned to the table. Roll them? Then why the phone call?

Huggins sat down. "You sure?" he asked Gaby, raising his glass.

"You are nice, Harry. But yes, I am sure."

By then I was standing over their table. Gaby stared at me with some slight interest. Huggins had a hard job focusing.

"Bedtime," I said brightly and in a clear voice. I wanted the patron and the taxi driver to hear me. If I didn't have to mention the mickeys, there was still the chance I could get Gaby and her escort out of there without a fight. "I'm a friend of your sister's," I told Gaby. "Time we were heading back, Miss Thevenin. I've got a car outside, and we can drop your friend at the dock on the way."

Gaby's eyes narrowed with anger. "We have our own taxi," she said coldly. She snapped her fingers in front of my face. "I do not give this for a—friend of my sister."

"Look," I said, "I'll explain it to you outside, but—"

"I want no explanations from you. I want nothing to do

with a watchdog sent by Caroline. The next time you are—  
together, tell her that."

"You've got it wrong," I said.

Huggins stood up unsteadily, the drink still in his hand.  
"You heard the lady. Beat it."

When I remained where I was, he took an awkward swipe at me with his free left hand. Half the brandy spilled out of the glass in his other hand. I shoved back, seemingly as awkwardly, and managed to spill the rest of it. In my follow-through I leaned a hard elbow on the table, dumping Gaby's glass. The brandy spread across the table, some of it dripping on her white gown.

"Clumsy oaf!" she cried, and Huggins took another poke at me. I let him have that one for free. It was a left hook that had a lot of weight behind it, but it lacked snap. When it connected with the side of my jaw, I pretended to be more hurt than I was. I staggered back against the wall and stood there with my arms and head hanging.

Huggins' face hovered close. "Had enough, mate?" He was grinning, pleased with himself. Over his shoulder I saw the patron hand Gaby a dish towel. She went to work on her gown. The taxi driver wasn't anywhere in sight. I heard the door slam.

When Huggins repeated his question, more truculently, I nodded but said: "It looks like you lost your cab."

Huggins grinned again, cockily. "We'll take yours, mate. Any objections?"

I said I had no objections. Huggins seemed disappointed. I'd been an easy target for a left hook, and he was spoiling for a fight. Maybe he thought showing her his prowess was one way into Gaby's bed.

He paid the patron and left with the girl. I dropped a few franc-notes on the table, but the patron stood between me and the door. He held a stick the size of a billy in his hand.

"A moment, monsieur," he said. "Spilling their drinks, that was no accident." I was twice his size, but he didn't look scared. Why should he? I had a glass jaw, didn't I?

"Out of my way, Frenchy," I said in English.



He brought the billy up and then down. I caught his wrist in mid-air and squeezed until he dropped the stick. Bending his arm back, I forced him to his knees. He made a squawking sound.

"Who'd the driver phone?"

No answer.

"Was it Duplesis?"

Same no answer. I bent the wrist further, and his face blanched.

"Oui. Oui, Duplesis. My arm, you will break it."

"What's his first name?"

". . . Raoul."

I dropped his arm and ran for the door. The early morning air was cool and smelled of the sea. I saw a Citroën 2CV parked at the curb, and both taxis. They were getting into the wrong one, their own Simca instead of the Peugeot that had brought me.

"Hold it," I shouted, going for the Magnum .44 in its clam-shell holster under my left arm. By then I was three steps outside the door and running. I heard a whisper of sound to my right. The darkness split wide open, suddenly blazing brightly. I fell into it.

My own taxi driver was leaning over me anxiously in the back seat of the Peugeot. My head felt as if it had jumped off a cliff with no help from the rest of me.

"They gone?" I tried to sit up. The driver's face went around and around.

"Perhaps it would be better if monsieur did not try to talk." But the spinning face nodded. "They have gone."

"In the other cab?"

"Yes. I know a doctor who—"

"What about the Citroën?"

"A man came in it, just as they emerged from the bistro. It was this man who hit you. With a gun, I think."

I felt for my own Magnum. It was still holstered.

"Then he followed the other taxi, monsieur."

"How long ago?"

"Fifteen minutes. Certainly no more than twenty."

"Get me to a phone."

I leaned back, aware of movement, the rumble of tires over cobblestones, the sound of a motor. Then I was outside, staring at a street-corner phone booth and wondering what I was supposed to do there. The driver supplied a *jeton*. I dropped it in the slot and asked the operator for Caroline Thevenin's number.

"Allo?"

"Drum. Where's Duplesis live?"

"Raoul? But why?"

"He took the kid. I got sapped. Where's he live?"

I heard the sharp intake of her breath, but she let me have his address. It was a few blocks in from the Croisette on the way to Nice.

We made it in less than ten minutes.

Raoul Duplesis had his pad in the caretaker's cottage of a big estate. We had to drive up a gravel road lined on either side with palm trees. The Peugeot stopped a good hundred yards from where we saw light up ahead.

"Monsieur, you have your business, but I, I am only a taxi driver."

I peeled a wad of franc-notes from my wallet and gave them to him. "Right. You stay here. If you hear gunfire, go for the gendarmes. Fast. Okay?"

When he nodded, not liking it but agreeing to it, I went crunch, crunch, crunch up the gravel road. I was beginning to feel better. I might even be able to take another one of Huggins' creampuff punches without falling through the floor.

The wind was making a racket in the palm fronds which I hoped would cover the crunch of gravel under my shoes. When I got close, I saw two windows, the one to the left of the door shuttered, the one to the right open to the sea breeze. A small lamp was lit behind the translucent curtains in the right-hand window, but very bright light pierced the slits in the shutters of the other one. It was so bright that it could have come only from a photo-floodlamp. I scowled.

Raoul Duplesis, pimp and artist, had turned into a photographer.

I paused at the open and dimly lit window, listening. Heard only the clattering of the palm fronds and the thumping of my own heartbeat. I went over the sill with the Magnum in my hand.

It was a small bedroom. The bed linen was turned back and had been wrestled with recently by an uneasy sleeper, but the bed was unoccupied now. There was a door opposite the window, partially ajar, and a brilliantly lit hallway beyond it. I took off my shoes, left them on the window sill and padded like a second-story man into the hallway.

At the far end I saw a doorway. A man with his back to me was silhouetted there against the glare of floodlamps. He seemed the right size to be the driver of the Simca taxi. He had his arms outstretched, holding the doorjamb on either side. He never heard me come up behind him. Either I was cat-quiet or what was going on inside the room had all his attention.

Holding the Magnum butt first, ready to use it if he moved, I looked over his shoulder.

Three photo-floods lit the large room brighter than day. There was a big sofa on the far wall and on the sofa was draped of all things a leopard skin and on the leopard skin was draped Gaby Thevenin. Nothing at all was draped on her. Her small nude body was magnificently proportioned and on her face she wore a dopey smile that, when the pictures were taken, might make her look either drunk or satiated or both. She was not quite out, but she'd been drugged to the eyeballs.

A hand and an arm came into my range of vision. They were attached to Raoul Duplesis, who was wearing white ducks and an Apache shirt. He lifted Gaby's chin. Her head lolled back, and he rearranged it for a good mug-shot. Then he tilted her torso so that the high, firm breasts were half in profile. Then he calmly arranged her left leg just so, showing pelvic shadow at the juncture of the sleek thighs.

What he had in mind was obvious. A few shots like that,

a few prints shown to Gaby afterwards, the threat of showing them to the head mistress at the finishing school in Montreux, and Gaby would meekly hand over her sister's dough.

Duplesis stepped back, raised the 35 millimeter camera hanging from his neck, squinted through the viewer and took a picture.

"*Mon dieu,*" gasped the man in the doorway. "But she is really something."

What happened then happened very quickly. Duplesis turned to stare at his confederate irritably and saw me. I socked the taxi driver behind his right ear with the butt of the Magnum. He dropped to his knees and pitched forward on his face. Duplesis threw something at me. At first I thought it was the camera, but he wouldn't throw that, not with the film in it. What he threw was a lightmeter, and it caught my left temple solidly. I swayed and went down, the Magnum squirting from my fingers. Duplesis ran at me and over me, a gun in his own hand. I turned over, caught his ankle and spilled him. We both got up. He'd lost his gun too. He bolted through the hallway, into the bedroom and out the window. I was right behind him.

I brought him down twenty yards along the gravel road with a flying tackle. We rolled over and over. Once I tasted gravel in my mouth and once Duplesis almost got away, but then I was straddling him and banging his head back and forth with short, chopping blows from both fists until he stopped struggling.

"Get up. You will get up," a woman's voice said. A hand grasped my shoulder. It was a soft woman's hand, but not gentle. I got up and saw Caroline Thevenin. Ranged on either side of her with hostile looks on their pretty faces were three other beeznis-girls.

"It is you," Caroline Thevenin said.

I pointed down at Duplesis. "Camera," I panted. "He was taking pictures of Gaby." I explained why, and she called him some choice names in French. Her sidekicks chimed in while

Caroline Thevenin got the camera, opened it and exposed the film.

"And Gaby?" she asked, suddenly alarmed.

"Inside. Doped but otherwise all right." All of a sudden I had an idea. "And you'll find a buddy of Duplesis'. Sapped."

"I will find? And you?"

I gave her the Magnum. "The guy on the floor ought to keep. But if he doesn't, you'll have this."

"I don't understand."

"Gaby," I said. "Get her out of there, take her home, feed her plenty of coffee and call a doctor. When she comes to, tell her I called you. Just called you. You and your friends did the rest. If you can get her to believe that, she might have a change of heart."

Caroline Thevenin nodded, smiling, and spoke rapidly in French. Then all four beeznis-girls strode, very beeznis-like, toward the cottage.

I waited among the palms until they returned. Two of them were carrying Gaby, wrapped in the leopard skin. By that time Duplesis had climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"You will leave Cannes in the morning," Caroline told him. She said something else. I didn't hear it, but whatever it was, it was a man-sized threat. Duplesis looked at her, and at the Magnum in her hand. "You will never come back," she said.

He nodded and scurried back toward the cottage with his tail between his legs.

I was sitting at a café on the Croisette with Caroline Thevenin the next day.

"Want another?" I said.

She looked down at her empty glass. She'd already told me that Huggins had been found wandering' dazed on the Croisette. He'd been slugged and left at the side of the road.

"And Gaby," she'd said with a smile over our first drink, "Gaby gives me back the money, and once again it is in a joint account. She does not think beeznis-girls are so bad, thanks to you."

Now Caroline held her hand over the empty glass. "No.

No more drink now. The afternoon grows late, and I must get ready."

"Ready?"

She gave me the full, dazzling Caroline Thevenin smile.

"Why, yes. For tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight I will—pay you."







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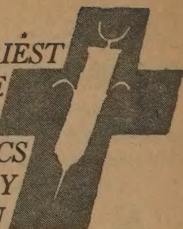
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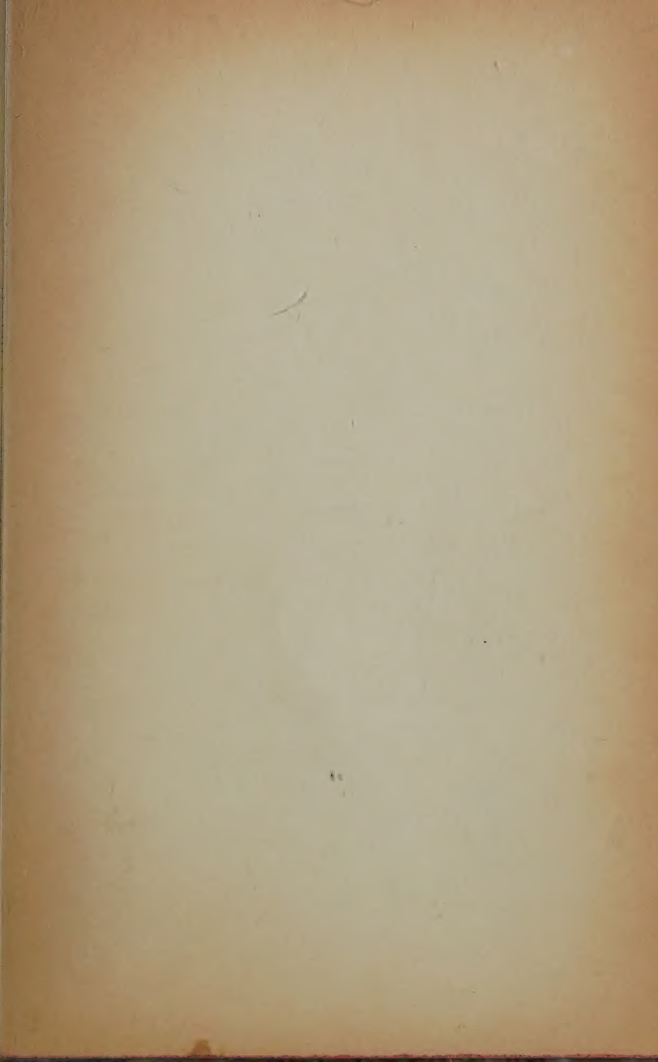
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